

This week's Complete Story is full of Dramatic Action.

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NORA RAISED HER GREAT BLUE EYES AND LOOKED AT HELEN FOR FULLY A MOMENT, THEN TURNED AND WENT SLOWLY TOWARDS THE HOUSE.

His First and Last Love.

By the Author of

"Only an Actor," "Maysie," &c., &c.

[A NOVELETTE.]

COMPLETE IN THIS NUMBER.

CHAPTER I.

I WAS sitting in the flower-laden porch, in an easy rocking chair, a book on my lap, my feet crossed inelegantly, and my hands clasped behind my head. I was dreaming, day-dreaming, and yet alive to all that was going on around.

I could hear the "swithe-e-e, swithe-e-e," of the sickle, coming from the meadows, as wielded by strong hands it mowed down the lush grasses, and the lowing of the kine as they stood knee deep in the flower-enamelled pastures waiting for the dairymaids, who were leisurely going to milk them, bantering and laughing on their way with the men, and the crowing of the barn-door cock, mingling with the grunts of big pigs and the squeaks of little ones, the stamping and neighing of horses, the incessant hum of the bees, and the "whir, whir" of many and many a gay-winged insect as they swept by.

I could hear it all, and see the bright flowers, rainbow-coloured, and sweet of scent, that made the garden so pretty, and

perfumed it with their sweetness, only I gazed at them with dreamy eyes, for my thoughts were full of Nora's coming on the morrow.

Now, Nora Hilliar was my cousin, my junior by three years by time, and almost ten by temperament, for I was quiet, staid and sedate, she merry, bright, and thoughtless, and we had not met for three years, she having been at Paris finishing her education, while I, having completed mine, and having most of the 'ologies at my finger tips, besides knowing Latin well, and speaking four languages beyond my own native English, had remained in Sussex at Skerryvoran, with my aunts, the Misses Trotpole, who were joint owners of the pretty, picturesque, old red brick house that was our

The Serial Story, "A GOLDEN DESTINY," will commence next week.

home, and to boot, three of the nicest, dearest, sweetest, old maids that ever lived.

First there was Miss Jane, tall, thin, slightly stooped, with corkscrew ringlets each side of her face of that peculiar, ashey-grey hue that fair hair turns, and blue eyes, and a peculiarly amiable expression. Then there was Miss Anne, of middle height, stout, with a fresh complexion, and white hair, and the remains of great good looks; and lastly, Miss Mary, small, slight, with straight delicate features, black hair, banded closely to her well-shaped head, and a pair of beautiful, brown eyes, with something sad and wistful in their soft depths.

She was my godmother and my favourite. Perfectly adorable, though they were all excessively nice and kind. My mother and Nora's had been younger, twins, and married within a couple of years of each other. But while Nora's mother lived until she was ten, mine died before I was a year old, and my father dying of grief a few months later, I was taken by my aunts, and really never remembered, never knew any home, save dear old Skerryvoran.

Those were twelve happy years I spent with them, their pet and darling, the object in whom all their interests and hopes centred; and then Nora came. Her mother died suddenly of fever in India, and Major Hilliar sent her over to England in charge of a faithful ayah, begging his sisters-in-law to take charge of her.

They accepted the charge with amiable readiness, though I think at first they would perhaps rather not have received her. However, she soon won her way into their hearts and into mine also.

At first I thought I should be jealous of the child, who was coming to divide the love of my dear ones with me, but I was not in the least. She was such a bright, gay, kittenish creature, it was impossible not to love her, and I petted and spoiled her just as much as our aunts did.

There was a great difference between us. I inherited from my Scotch father a certain amount of prudence and staidness, with a strong dash of that solid firmness and determination which is one of the Highlanders' chief characteristics; while Nora from her Irish father inherited the gay *debonnaire* merriness of the thoughtless Celt, and was my antithesis in every respect, often doing and saying things of which I would never have dreamt, and certainly would never have dared to utter. Nevertheless, we were excellent friends for the four years she remained at Skerryvoran, and parted only with tears and regrets when she, by her father's wish at fourteen, went to a finishing school at Paris.

She was coming back, and would arrive to-morrow, and as I sat there in the rose-covered porch I wondered for the hundredth time what she would be like, whether she fulfilled the promise of extreme beauty she gave three years before, and whether she was as gay, tormenting, winsome, and thoughtless as of yore?

The train of my ideas was interrupted by Aunt Jane, who appeared in a big white apron, with signs of heat about her calm face that plainly showed she had been over the kitchen fire, for she generally superintended the cooking, and was famous at whips, creams, and jellies.

"Well, child," she began, addressing me as I had always done, though I was turned twenty, "have you been improving your mind? Do you like your book?"

"Very much," I hastened to reply, with a little guilty flush, for I had not read more than a page of "Lives of Famous Women" that afternoon.

"That is right. You will be able to help

Nora when she comes with your superior knowledge."

"She may not want helping, aunt. Her accomplishments will, I have no doubt, surpass mine."

"That is not likely. You have had a thorough solid English education, have been well-grounded in all branches; the French teach more showy things; like their cooking, it is frothy and less substantial. In fact, I do not believe in English girls going to France to finish their education. I think they do better at home. I do not believe in it at all."

"What do you not believe in, sister?" asked Aunt Anne, as she appeared in the porch, also in a big white apron, with a basket on her arm, garden gloves three sizes too large on her little fat hands and a huge pair of scissors.

"Girls going to France to be finished, Anne."

"And I agree with you, sister," said the younger lady, with a sage nod of the head that made her two rows of corkscrew ringlets shake and quiver again. "There are priests there, and popish people, and convents, and confessions, and many things to induce a child to go over to Rome."

"Yes, indeed, sister," sighed Aunt Jane.

"And I've heard that they eat frogs and snails, and that you can't buy a whole fowl or rabbit in the place. They're all cut up into pieces, and as for a good, wholesome joint, it's not to be had. A leg of mutton's a thing they don't understand, and it's not good for a young girl to be fed upon messes, and potages, and such-like greasy things."

"Certainly not," agreed Miss Trotpole, with an air of thorough conviction.

My aunts were dear, good creatures, but they had never been out of England, and their ideas of foreign countries were rather strange and amusing.

"Now, the dinner we shall give Dr. Peters and Dr. Hadlow to-night will be wholesome and nourishing, from fish to dessert."

"That I am sure it will, sister, cried Aunt Anne at once, for she had an immense respect for her sister's powers as a house-keeper and manager.

"I have decided not to have soup," continued Aunt Jane. "It is so very warm; I thought to begin with fish pleasant and more proper to the season."

"Certainly, sister, certainly."

"And the table I will leave to you and Mary. You are going to get the flowers now, I suppose?"

"Yes, Jane, now."

"We shall want a good supply, sister. It is not often we entertain, and we must do it thoroughly."

"Of course, and bachelors," with a slight blush, "are more particular than married men."

"How can you know, Anne?" queried Aunt Jane, almost sharply, the shadow of a frown on her amiable face.

"I—I—have heard dear Ethel (Nora's mother) say so," faltered Miss Anne, the blush deepening, and stealing up to the roots of her pretty white hair.

"Oh! Well, Helen, you had better help your aunt to gather the flowers, and then to arrange them. We must not let Mary fatigue herself. She is not strong yet. I have my tart and custards to see to and a whip. Doctor Peters likes a whip better than anything else."

"With a flavouring of vanilla, Jane. Don't forget that."

"Am I likely to, sister?" demanded Aunt Jane, with sudden sternness. "Do I ever forget any flavouring or essence any particular guest or inmate of our home likes?"

"No, no. Your cooking is perfection," the younger sister hastened to assure her elder.

"Then it is needless to remind me of anything connected with it. Your province, Anne, is the garden."

"Yes, sister," agreed the other, meekly picking up her basket and scissors and stepping out into the quaint old garden, where the roses bloomed luxuriantly, and the red pinks shed their perfume on the air, and the tiger lilies reared their colourless, graceful heads, and the geraniums made a perfect blaze of colour, and the pansies dotted the dark earth with their yellow-white, and purple blooms, and the sweet william, hollyhocks, and love-lies-bleeding grew.

I followed with another basket, and soon we had snipped off a goodly bouquet of blooms.

"Enough now, Helen. Don't you think so?"

"Plenty, aunt. Shall we go and arrange them?"

"Perhaps we had better, and get Parsons to lay the cloth. I don't want Mary to exert herself. She will if we don't get it all finished before she wakes from her afternoon nap. The glass and china are her department, you know."

"Yes."

My aunts lived together in almost unbroken amity, only not one of them liked any encroachment on her particular "department."

Miss Jane's was the kitchen and the cookery, Miss Anne's the garden, conservatory, and the decoration of the rooms with her floral treasures; while Miss Mary superintended the glass, china, and plate, some of which was most costly and beautiful, and laid the table with the help of the ancient handmaiden Keziah, whenever they had company.

Of course, Aunt Jane, as the eldest, was mistress of the house, and always decided any momentous question, but she was rigidly particular in not interfering with her sisters' departments, and was quick to resent any interference from them, but Mary never troubled her.

She was the most intellectual of the sisters, and spent all her spare moments reading theological, historical, or geographical works. Aunt Anne, was, if I may apply the term, only it does not seem to express quite what I mean, the most frivolous and thoughtless. She had been very handsome, and I often wondered she had not married.

Aunt Jane, I knew, had been engaged to a young naval lieutenant, who, one stormy night, went down with his good ship and comrades, and was never heard of after.

So her state of single blessedness was accounted for, and my godmother never seemed to care much for men or their society, so I conjectured it was from choice she remained an "unappropriated blessing."

But Aunt Anne was different. About her costumes there was a *souçon* of fashion, a suggestion that a considerable amount of time and thought had been expended on them. Her laces and neck frills were of the finest and snowiest, her boots and shoes were more shapely than her sisters', and she wore nothing on her white hair; neither a dainty little confection of lace such as Aunt Mary wore, nor a bonnet-like arrangement crowned with flowers and feathers similar to that Aunt Jane sported.

It always seemed to me that she regretted her lost youth, sighed for the vanished days when she was young and handsome, and clung tenaciously to anything and everything that would make her seem and feel a little younger.

However, at fifty-five it is hard for a woman to keep up the illusion of youth, and her "too-too solid flesh," moreover, was a source of grief to her.

I knew she secretly envied her slimmer sisters, and worried herself more than Mary, who was five years her junior, did about her personal appearance.

Aunt Jane was sixty-two, and made no secret of her age. Indeed, it would have been difficult to find a more sensible woman than Miss Troppole, and yet I liked her least of all my aunts.

My godmother was a delightful companion. It was quite a treat to spend an afternoon in her particular little sanctum under the eaves, which was fitted up with bookshelves, and bore a goodly store of books, and listen to her conversation.

She was so well-read she knew a little of everything, and could always answer a question put by a young and inquiring mind; but she was careless about her dress, generally wearing a dingy old black gown, and formed a striking contrast in that respect to her second sister.

Aunt Anne used to look so pretty of a bright summer's morning, with her neat cambric gown trimmed with ribbons, filmy laces at her throat and wrists, her clear skin soft and fine as a girl's glowing with health, and her beautiful silvery hair arranged with the greatest precision in four curls at each side of her face, and a knot at the back, that I often wondered that at this late period of her existence some nice old gentleman of sixty or thereabouts did not sue for her hand and heart, and take her unto himself "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, till death them did part," and make her his wife.

Men, however, about Standron were not numerous, nor perhaps inclined for matrimony, and the larger portion of them were decidedly old, thinking of mere creature comforts, and possibly preparing for the next world.

Amongst the young ones there was lawyer Perkins' son, an insufferable little snob, who thought of nothing save his boots and ties.

The Reverend Mark Mavis, a pale, attenuated, sanctimonious-looking man, with blinky eyes, a stoop, and high church views, and Doctor John Hadlow, a clever, rising young man, who came as old Doctor Peter's partner two years before, and took most of the work off his shoulders.

In the cottages and amongst the poor he was welcomed warmly. People seemed to have faith in him, to gain hope when they looked at his keen, clever, pleasant face.

There was a sense of power and comfort in his mere presence that was very sustaining to the sick and weak.

A few of the older gentlefolk clung tenaciously to Doctor Peters, seeming to prefer his old-fashioned ways to new-fangled methods of putting health in a diseased body, and amongst the number were my aunts.

"Shall you have young Doctor Hadlow, sister?" asked Miss Anne, soon after his arrival in Standron.

"Certainly not," returned Miss Jane, promptly, straightening her back and holding her head very stiffly.

"Why not?" pursued her sister.

"It would not—not—be right for unmarried women to receive such a young man in the capacity of medical adviser. He is only twenty-nine! A mere boy!"

"But, sister," with some hesitation, and the ready blush rising to her smooth cheek, "it is said Doctor Peters will take no night work now, and that he is quite laid up occasionally with the rheumatics. What would you do if he were ill and you required some one here?"

"There is Sparrow, of Helston," she replied, briefly. "I would call him in."

"Oh, surely not, sister!" broke out Miss Anne. "It would be an affront to dear, kind, Doctor Peters."

"Yes, I hardly think that would do, sister," observed Miss Mary, in her low, sweet tones. "It would not do to pass over our old doctor's partner."

"Perhaps not," agreed Aunt Jane, after a minute's reflection, always influenced by her youngest sister's wise and sensible opinion. "I trust, Heaven willing, that none of us may require the services of either of them for a long time."

However, we did. Six months later Aunt Mary fell ill with a sort of low fever, and, it being winter time, and the elder partner confined to his room with a sharp attack of rheumatism, Doctor Hadlow was obliged to come and minister to the invalid's necessities.

In a very short time he won over Aunt Jane, who declared she had the greatest confidence in him. He was so refined and gentle in his treatment, so sympathetic and capable that he became a great favourite with the three old ladies, who were never tired of sounding his praises, and certainly he was unemitting in his attentions during the year of aunt's illness, and often looked in to see her when she recovered, more in a friendly way than otherwise, for the illness left her rather delicate and easily fatigued, and Dr. Peters found, perhaps a trifle to his chagrin, that he was no longer a necessity at Skerryvoran, though Miss Anne always welcomed him with undisguised delight and warmth—a proceeding which occasionally drew down a rebuke on her head from her grave, elder sister.

However, they were all very grateful to the doctor for having pulled Aunt Mary through an illness which at one time threatened to end fatally, and to show their gratitude, were giving a little dinner which had been talked about and conned over for weeks.

To them it was a momentous event, a landmark in their quiet and uneventful lives. To me it was a pleasant break, for wholesome, healthy, peaceful, as my life was at Skerryvoran, it was yet a little monotonous, a trifle dull, and, with the selfishness of youth, I grasped at any change, any amusement, anything that would bring a fresh interest into my life.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN I got down to the drawing-room after donning my white muslin dress, I found Aunt Jane magnificent in a black satin gown and point lace, and a wonderful cap with gold flowers and feathers and furbelows, standing before the fireplace bolt upright, her mittened hands crossed before her, while in an armchair near sat Aunt Mary attired in a black grenadine, liberally trimmed with white lace, a little cap of the same perched on her neatly-coiled black hair. She did not seem to be quite at her ease, and ever and anon her eyes turned expectantly to the door on which Miss Troppole's were fixed with almost angry intentness.

"Really, I am surprised at Anne!" she exclaimed at last. "She ought to be dressed long ago; she will not be down to receive our guests."

"She will come soon now, sister," replied my godmother, soothingly.

"It ought to be soon, or the Perkins' will be here; you know Niralta Perkins is always punctual; in fact, she errs on the side of being too punctual."

"Yes, sister, but it wants twenty minutes to seven yet."

"Niralta will be here in another five minutes. It will never do for Anne not to be here to receive her with us. Helen,

dear child, run and urge your aunt to use despatch."

Thus adjured, I ran lightly up the wide oaken staircase, and knocking at a door straight opposite, went in without waiting for permission.

Aunt Anne was standing before the mirror, draping some filmy lace round the neck of her dress, which was open a little way, and displayed her white throat, fair, round, full as a girl's. It was of grey silk with a little shiny satiny spot on it; a bunch of pale blue ribbons draped it slightly at one side, and knots of the same decorated the sleeves and bosom. On her feet were dainty black French shoes, with coquettish little bows; black mittens adorned her plump hands, which shone and sparkled with several quaint old rings; and she had just fastened the lace at her breast, modestly fashion, with a brooch of the frying-pan order, quantity more than quality having, apparently, been the aim of the designer. Her silken hair was arranged with the greatest care; her smooth cheeks were flushed, her blue eyes sparkled with excitement, and altogether she looked like a quaint and exceedingly pretty picture.

"Helen!" she said, in a voice scarcely above a whisper, as I entered, "do you think I might wear a flower?" Her eyes resting longingly as she spoke on an exquisite spray of white roses just tin with pink that stood in a specimen glass the toilet table.

"A flower? Of course, aunt," I replied promptly, pinning the spray at the side of her neck. "And now, are you ready? Aunt Jane is afraid the people will arrive before you come down."

"Yes, I am ready," she assented, stealing a last look in the mirror, and then picking up a lace-trimmed handkerchief, about the size of a small table-cloth, which exhaled a slight perfume of dried rose leaves, she trotted out of the room and down the staircase beside me.

I saw Aunt Jane's brow contract with quick displeasure as she surveyed her sister's gay and somewhat youthful costume and flower, and she was just opening her mouth to administer a reproof to this thoughtless, vain, younger relative, when a sounding peal at the bell rang out and stopped the homily.

"Anne, stand by me; Mary, don't get up till they are in the room; every one will excuse you after your recent illness," and then she stood erect, trying to appear unconcerned, but really trembling with excitement.

The first arrivals proved to be Mr. and Mrs. Perkins and Perkins Junior—a charming old couple, whose graceless cub of a son seemed to be of quite another breed and race, so different was he from the old folk. Five minutes later the Rev. Mark Mavis appeared, looking gaunt and famished, as though he and a good meal had long been strangers to each other, and lastly the doctors came, and were very warmly welcomed, Aunt Anne actually beaming on Doctor Peters, who immediately began to chat volubly to her, and finally took her into dinner, though Doctor Hadlow ought to have been her cavalier. However, he took Aunt Mary, while Aunt Jane led the way with Mr. Perkins, and I brought up the rear with the cub, the half-starved curate falling to Mrs. Perkins' lot.

The table looked very pretty with its load of lovely flowers, and beautiful china and plate, and even if some of the things were a trifle old-fashioned and out of date nobody noticed it, for the viands were good and dressed to perfection, and the wines were old and mellow, having been in my grandfather's cellar many years.

The generous liquor loosened the cub's tongue, and he discoursed fluently about a neat thing in spotted neckties that he had seen in town during a recent visit to the gay metropolis, and the cut of the "club chaps'" boots, and many other things not altogether of the kind a young woman cares to listen to. However, I did not listen. I let him run on like a mill stream, giving a sort of grunt every now and again when he paused. To tell the truth, I was listening to Doctor Hadlow discoursing about the outbreak of fever and diphtheria in the neighbouring village of Helston. He sat just opposite me with Aunt Mary, and I could hear every word they said, and as their conversation was infinitely more interesting than the cub's, I did not hesitate about listening.

"Yes," I heard him say, in answer to a remark of aunt's, "the whole place is in an insanitary condition. It is perfectly scandalous. The owner ought to be prosecuted. Oh! away is he? Absenteeism again. You see it is bad here in England as well as in Ireland."

"Of course. It is difficult to make a man do his duty when he is the other side of the world."

"Exactly. I suppose it is indolence and carelessness rather than absolute wanton indifference; at any rate, we will hope so, for I think the hardest heart would melt at sight of those poor little children choking and dying with diphtheria, and those gaunt, spectre-like men and women, who drag themselves wearily about the place, emaciated and enervated by the damp, unwholesome atmosphere, and who fall ready victims to this insidious fever."

"How terrible! Can nothing be done?"

"Very little, I fear, without the owner."

"It is very different at Penvale," observed aunt, as though a little anxious to get away from a painful and unpleasant subject.

"Sir Percy Masham's place?"

"Yes."

"Oh, he is simply a model landlord. Each of his tenants has an airy, convenient cottage, with all the new fangled and best arrangements for drainage and ventilation, etc., and it appears is bound to keep the gardens and the outhouse neat and trim. There is never a dirty blind, weedy gardens, neglected children, or slatternly women to be seen there. Misery, poverty and dirt seem to be unknown things at Penvale."

"Yet he is an absentee?"

"Has been away four years, I believe."

"Yes; Lady Louisa suffered with her chest, and the doctors advised a prolonged stay in Italy."

"I see."

"Of course, her son went with her. He is an estimable young man in every way. It is a pleasure to know him and contemplate his actions."

"It is always pleasant to see a man do his duty nobly," replied the doctor, with little uplifting of his head peculiar to him when he wished to emphasize what he said, and then their conversation drifted into less interesting channels, and the cub claimed my attention again by asking me if I thought a green, or a blue veil, would be best to wear at the Derby on the following Wednesday? But as I had never been to a race in my life, and knew nothing about the Derby, I was not able to help him materially to a decision, and I was not sorry when Aunt Jane soon after gave the signal for the ladies to retire.

Dr. Hadlow held open the door for us, and as I passed through he stooped his tall head, and said, with the rare smile that lit up his rather stern face, so pleasantly,—

"I shall hope to hear my favourite song to-night."

I blushed and nodded assent, and felt my heart pulse rapidly under my muslin bodice as I crossed the hall demurely in the wake of my elders, who were unconscious of this little bye play.

Mrs. Perkins was playing the latest valse when the gentlemen came into the drawing-room, the cub looking a little flushed, and walking the least bit in the world unsteadily, and Dr. Peters steered straight for the sofa where Aunt Anne was sitting, fanning herself vigorously with a mite of a Chinese ivory fan that could have been no manner of use in producing a current of air, while Dr. Hadlow joined me at the open window, and discoursed fluently about the stars, and Venus, and Ursa Major and Minor, &c.

"Doctor," I began, when there was a pause in the conversation, "I want to ask you if I can be of any use at Helston?"

"Of use at Helston?" he repeated, surprisedly, fixing his clear, grey eyes on me scrutinizingly. "In what way do you mean, Miss Markham?"

"In helping to nurse the sick," I replied, promptly.

"You know the fever is a very nasty one, difficult to get rid of when once caught?"

"Yes, I know," I agreed, meeting his glance for a second, and then lowering my lids with an unaccountable feeling of shyness.

"And that the diphtheria is of a very malignant type?"

"Yes; I have heard there have been several deaths from it."

"And yet—you would go into that disease-stricken village?"

"If I could be of any use to the poor sick people, yes."

"It is very noble of you!" he said, earnestly. "But—would your aunts let you go?"

"I—I don't know," I faltered, for I knew they were too fond of me to like to let me run any risk.

"Neither do I; yet I think not. And even if they would, I could not let you go into danger, Miss Helen."

"There might be no danger," I murmured, thrilled through by the low, intense tones of the man beside me, and his glance, which was fixed on me with curious intentness.

"There would be great danger of infection."

"I am so strong," I objected. "I have never had a day's illness."

"No reason why you should not catch the fever. I could not let you go. Come, now, and sing my favourite; Mrs. Perkins has vacated the music stool," and he led the way to the piano, and, seating himself before it, struck the opening bars,—

"The arrow to the quiver,

And the wild bird to the tree;

The stream to meet the river,

And the river to the sea.

The waves are wedded on the beach,

The shadows on the lea;

And like to like, and each to each,

And I to thee."

How I sang that night! My whole soul seemed to flow out through my lips in a flood of melody, rising, falling, softening, dying away to a murmur, throbbing on the warm, summer air.

I seemed to electrify my audience and my accompanist, for he thanked me with ardent warmth when it was over, and begged for more songs, keeping me at the piano for quite an hour.

The last I sang was one with some more

pretty lines of Whyte-Melville's, only more melancholy—

"What are we waiting for? Oh, my heart!
Kiss me straight on the brow, and part!
Again! again! My heart! my heart!
What are we waiting for, you and I?
A pleading look, a stifled cry.
Good-bye for ever! Good-bye! good bye!"

I knew my voice was an uncommon one—so rich, so round, so full, and I did my best in that last song.

"Beautifully rendered!" exclaimed Doctor Hadlow. "A charming melody and pretty words, only too sad. I do not like good-byes; they are always painful, and I know I should find it very painful to say good-bye for ever to you, Miss Helen," and then as he bade me good-night he pressed my hand tenderly, and I felt a thrill of pleasure (so exquisite as to be akin to pain) run through me from head to foot at his pressure and meaning words.

Oh, men! men! why do you say things you do not mean? Why wake up the knowledge of love in a young heart, only to crush and kill it cruelly? Why arouse the tumultuous springs of passion, touching the heart strings with careless and, perchance, indifferent touch, only to leave them dumb ever after? Ah! it is a problem no woman can solve; a riddle for which there is no answer; for sometimes

"Sorrow is wrought by want of thought,
As well as by want of heart,"

And even in my moments of deepest anguish, of most bitter despair, I could never bring myself to believe that John Hadlow was wantonly cruel, or utterly heartless. No! it was fate, destiny (call it what you please), and he was powerless to resist the siren's spell, powerless to be true to me.

CHAPTER III.

THE next day Nora arrived. I drove aunt Jane down to the station in the basket phaeton, drawn by Cosmo, the old grey pony, who was so fat he could only waddle at a sort of jog-trot, and never attempted the madness of a canter or gallop.

We arrived quite twenty minutes before the train was due, for Aunt always insisted upon starting at least half an hour before it was necessary, and while we were waiting, Doctor Hadlow came out of the station and stopped to speak to us.

"How are you, Miss Troppole? Not fatigued, I trust, after your hospitality of last night?"

"Not at all!" replied Aunt Jane, with a gracious smile; "it was a pleasant break in our quiet lives."

"Yes, yes! and beneficial! A little excitement does one a world of good."

"Yes! a little; not too much."

"Too much of anything is good for nothing," he laughed. "You are expecting another niece to-day, are you not?" he went on, speaking to aunt, but looking at me, and something in his eyes made a warm blush rise over cheek and brow, and a blush which I am sure he noted.

"Yes! A young thing, a mere child. She spent four years with us before, and has been in Paris at school."

"I see. A pleasant companion for you, Miss Helen."

"Delightful!" I cried, warmly. "I am very fond of little Nora; she is so gay and bright."

"True!" said Aunt, with rather a serious expression; "but the child wants careful training and very judicious management. I fear she is frivolous and careless; there is no repose about her."

"We can't put staid heads on young shoulders," he smiled, "Your niece will

no doubt be grave enough in a few years. Time works great wonders in that respect."

"You are right, and yet," with a portentous sigh, that made her breast heave, and stirred the laces on the front of her mantle stormily. "I would rather she showed more seriousness and sedateness now. As the boy is father to the man, so is a girl mother to the woman. It is impossible to entirely alter a nature."

"Perhaps! Only a great deal that is not desirable can be eliminated, and careful training is the best thing for a child."

"True, true. But these last three years will have done a great deal towards moulding her character, and what sort of training has she had? Of a kind, possibly, that we might not approve of."

"Possibly. Still, hope for the best. Good-bye."

"Thank you for those songs," he whispered, as he pressed my hand, and again the warm blushes mantled over my face and brow.

In after days how angry I felt with myself, and how humiliated! Those tell-tale blushes that revealed to John Hadlow the fact that I had given him my heart unsought and unasked.

A few moments later the train came into view, gliding like a snake through the green and verdant hills, smirching the clear sky with a thick cloud of smoke as it came along, panting and snorting and drew up at the little country station.

Aunt Jane got out of the carriage and went forward to look for Nora. She would not permit me to do so. I knew nothing on earth would have induced her to trust herself behind poor, fat, harmless Cosmo. So I was left alone while she went on to the platform. Divers passengers streamed out and went their different ways, and finally Aunt Jane appeared, with a young girl beside her, and a porter wheeling on his truck a brace of huge boxes; and a heap of smaller impedimenta that were stowed into the carrier's cart to be taken to Skerryvoran, while aunt and Nora got into the pony carriage, the latter giving me an impulsive hug and half-a-dozen kisses before she settled herself opposite us, and shook out the flounces and furbelows of her pretty grey gown, made in the height of the last Parisian fashion.

Indeed, the whole costume was extremely chic and fashionable, and smacked more of the Boulevards and the Champs Elysees than of a seminary where good precept and unworldliness were inculcated along with languages and accomplishments.

I saw Aunt Jane cast several displeased looks at the big dish-like hat with its drooping grey plumes, at the long gloves of the same colour, with at least two dozen buttons, at the little pointed-toed bottines, and the flounces and furbelows.

For myself, I could do nothing but gaze at her face, and it was fortunate that Cosmo was old, and fat, and lazy, and knew the way home thoroughly, or we might have come to grief.

Pretty she had been as a child, now she had bloomed into a most lovely girl. It was the sweetest, most winsome face imaginable that peeped out from under the broad-leaved beplumed hat.

Her eyes were deep blue, merry, bright eyes, with a double row of thick, black lashes, her hair was of a bright sunny brown, almost bronze, her saucy nose was *retroussé*, the mouth small and red lipped, and curved like a Cupid's bow, while the chin was dimpled as a baby's. Her skin was darker than that usually seen with blue eyes, and her cheek wore a lovely bloom, like the side of a sun-kissed peach, and the little curls and tendrils of hair straying over the broad, low forehead, clinging

round the shell-like ears, and curling lovingly round the slender throat, made a fitting frame for the bright, beautiful, attractive face. How dull, insignificant and drab-coloured I felt beside her. My brown hair seemed colourless, my skin pallid, my whole self commonplace.

What would Doctor Hadlow think of her?

For a moment a mighty wave of jealousy swept over me, then I crushed it down. The doctor was just thirty; a girl of seventeen would be a mere child to him, and he was usually grave and sedate, and the sorrow and sickness he saw so much of, imparted a seriousness to his manner that made him appear older than he really was. Such a bright butterfly as Nora would appear almost like an inhabitant of another sphere to him.

Both Aunt Anne and Aunt Mary were waiting in the porch to welcome the traveller, and she was kissed again and again by both, and then the former, holding her at arm's length, exclaimed,—

"How lovely you are, child. Just what your dear mother was at the same age."

"Anne!" exclaimed Aunt Jane, severely, "how can you be so imprudent, putting ridiculous ideas into the child's head!"

"I—I—didn't mean to, sister," faltered the culprit. "Only she is so like poor Ethel."

"Perhaps; you need not tell her she is a beauty; though, Nora, I hope you don't set much store by that vanity, evanescent possession—good looks?"

"I don't know, aunt," she returned, promptly and carelessly, "I rather think I do."

"Vanity! vanity!" groaned Miss Trot-pole.

"It's much nicer to have pretty hair," unconsciously stroking the little bronze curls on her forehead, "and to have rosy cheeks than to be drab-coloured like Keziah, washed-out looking."

"Nora! Nora! She is as Heaven made her. I must talk to you seriously, child."

"Aunt Jane isn't half as nice as she used to be," remarked my cousin that night when we had retired to the bedroom we shared in common and were disrobing.

"Don't you think so?" I replied.

"No, I don't. She has lectured me already twice since I've been here, and means to go on, I think, from what she said to-day."

"It is so ridiculous!" she burst out a moment later, "as though one should not be proud of hair like this," touching the shining waves of hair that, unbound, rippled in a flood of sunny light below her waist.

She had taken off her dress, and sat in her white petticoat and low bodv, which revealed the beautifully rounded milk-white arms and slender throat.

"I should be proud of it," I acknowledged.

"Of course; so would any sensible person. Aunt Anne said she would, and our mother of the church (her name for Aunt Mary). I don't see the use of Aunt Jane being crabby and disagreeable because her lover died years and years ago, and she couldn't marry. It's nonsense; Madame de Bruse was far more sensible. She never lectured us; only told us to be very careful of any personal attractions we might possess."

"You wouldn't mourn and regret a lover all your life, Nora?" I queried, interrogatively.

"Certainly not," she replied, contemplating the tips of her tiny kid slippers.

"What would you do if the man you were engaged to marry died?"

"Look out for another, after a decent interval."

"Not if you cared for him very passionately."

"Perhaps not. Only——"

"Only what?" I asked, a trifle impatiently.

"I don't think, Nell, I ever shall love any man very passionately."

"You don't know, you may."

"I may, of course. But I should infinitely prefer being beloved intensely to loving very much myself. It doesn't answer adoring one's husband. Much better and more satisfactory to be adored."

"You seem to know a good deal about it," I remarked, looking at her keenly.

"Who has been instructing you?"

"Madame de Bruse was very sentimental, and would talk by the hour beautifully."

"Strange thing for a schoolmistress to do."

"She was strict enough, though, actually. I never even had the ghost of a lover in Paris. Still, I think I ought to have had some," and she cast a merry glance at her winsome reflection in the mirror. "Most of the women over there touch up their complexions. Mine is natural and won't come off," rubbing the rounded cheeks hard.

"Plenty of time for lovers," I said, severely. "You're only a child, Nora."

"Pooh!" she laughed. "You're taking a leaf out of my Aunt Jane's book. How stiff and prim you do look. Nell, that comes of living with old maids. Heigho! I hope it won't be terribly dull here, or I shall have to write to father and ask him to let me go out to India."

"I am sure he won't let you do that," I said, decidedly, as I put out the candle and got into bed.

I think Nora did find it dull during the next two days; there was nothing going on, and no doubt the change from the gay bustle of Paris to the hum-drum quiet of Standron was trying.

"Are there no young men in this benighted little place?" she asked me on the third day after her arrival.

"Very few."

"Do the few ever come to Skerryvoran?"

"Sometimes."

"When? I should like to have an opportunity of seeing them. They must be natural curiosities."

"You will be gratified, probably this afternoon."

"How? Why?" turning a pair of bright, inquiring eyes on me.

"Our aunts always remain at home on the first Saturday in the month, and friends and acquaintances come to see them, and——"

"And drink weak tea and listen to Aunt Jane's homilies," she laughed. "This is a new thing. I had no idea they were so fashionable."

"They don't do it for fashion," I told her.

"For what, then?"

"To see old friends who come from a distance. They were often disappointed at finding them out."

"I see. And where do they drink tea and talk scandal?"

"My dear Nora, they don't talk scandal."

"Well, then, leave out the scandal. Where is the cat-lap consumed?"

"In winter in the drawing-room, in summer out here on the lawn, under the big cedar."

"That's rather jolly!" she exclaimed, childishly, her face brightening. "And do they ever have anything worth eating?"

"What do you say to strawberries and cream?"

"Delicious! Do the aunts really permit

them to be eaten?—I thought they were only to be looked at," casting a glance at the strawberry beds, where the luscious, tempting fruit peeped out redly from among the green leaves.

"Yes, Keziah has gathered a big bowl full, and there she comes to set out the table."

"This is fun. Regular dissipation. I did not think our staid and elderly relatives were so gay."

"Really, Nora, you ought not to speak of the aunts in that way," I began, reprovingly, but I was talking to the air. The giddy girl had floated away, and was teasing and hindering Keziah with a heap of totally unanswerable questions which puzzled the good soul wondrously.

Presently the three Miss-Trotpoles appeared in their best bibs and tuckers, and sat down under the cedar.

Aunt Jane bolt upright with an antique cookery book in her hands, which she studied from time to time with the help of a pair of thick rimmed silver spectacles, Aunt Anne, with a piece of muslin, which she stabbed with a miniature dagger, and then stitched over with regular and monotonous precision; Aunt Mary with a volume of Carlyle, I sat near them reading Tennyson, and Nora flitted hither and thither like a butterfly or a bird, or any bright, joyous, restless thing.

After a while Mrs. Perkins and her son came, and the cub attached himself at once to my cousin, and paid her blundering compliments, at which she laughed and Aunt Jane frowned; then Mark Mavis came, pale and wretched-looking as usual, and his rector and his buxom daughters and some old maiden ladies, and Doctor Peters, who, as usual, found a great deal of interest to say to Aunt Anne, and finally, when the sun was beginning to sink below the level of the tall tree tops and stream in floods of golden light between their massive trunks and gnarled roots, Doctor Hadlow came.

How well he looked that afternoon, almost handsome with his erect bearing, clean shaven face, save for the heavy moustache and high collar, looking more like an officer than a medical man.

I saw the little movement of surprise he made when he was introduced to Nora, and my jealous eyes noted, too, how long his gaze lingered on the fair face.

They chatted away gaily together, my little cousin starting all sorts of topics of which I should never have thought, and talking fluently and well, while I stood stupidly by, feeling as though the whole fabric of my life was crumbling away, my castles in the air toppling down about my ears with a cruel vengeance.

"What do you think of her?" was all I could find to say when we were left standing a little apart from the others.

"Think? Of whom?" he asked, dreamily.

"Of my cousin."

"Miss Hilliard?"

"Yes."

"She is inexpressibly lovely," his eyes following the fairy-like figure in the white gown, with a bunch of blush roses pinned just underneath the dimpled rounded chin. "I have never seen anything more beautiful than her face, and there is a peculiar charm, a fascination in her manner, which is alluring."

"She is very winsome," I said, dully, the first of many and many an after twinge of pain tugging at my heartstrings, making me feel sick and faint and weary unto death, with a terrible sense of loss and hopelessness, as though something had gone out of my life which would never come back into it, and which left it dull, grey, cheerless!

CHAPTER IV.

It was a curious thing, but after that June evening when John Hadlow met Nora Hilliard he seldom let a day pass without coming to Skerryvora. Of course, since Aunt Mary's illness he had been a pretty constant visitor. After that the day seemed all out of joint when he did not appear. Sometimes he came early in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon, generally in the evening, when the chief burden of the day's work was over, and always he sought Nora's side, and always his clear, grey eyes rested on her fair young face with a hunger eagerness, an adoring gaze, that made the ache at my sad heart grow heavier.

No one could doubt that he loved her. At any rate, I did not. I never blinded myself for a moment to the true state of affairs. Even when sometimes he, as of yore, stood beside me at the piano while I sang, and thanked me warmly when I finished, I was never foolish enough to think that he regarded me with the old feeling that I believe he entertained for me before Nora came to Skerryvora.

As for her, her manner towards him was a mass of contradictions. One day she would be free and open with him as a child, the next, reserved and shy, then haughty and proud, and again she would unbend and bewilder him by a dangerous friendliness, showing a flattering interest in him and all that concerned him, and flashing looks from her lovely tell-tale eyes that maddened and intoxicated him with rapture and happiness.

He was ardent and eager, and terribly in earnest. His saucy idol was all gaiety and brightness until he tried to approach her on the subject that lay next his heart, and then she would freeze, or become shy, and fly to me or one of the aunts for protection from this importunate lover.

I suppose they saw what was going on, and approved of it, for not even Aunt Jane ventured on a homily, while Aunt Anne positively boomed upon the lovers, and watched them secretly on every possible occasion.

So matters went on, and the autumn came, and I was not at all surprised when one day she came to me—I was sitting in our room by the open window, gazing out sadly at "falling leaf and fading tree," my hands lying idly in my lap—blushing and dimpling, and kneeling down before me, put two white hands on my knee, and lifting a pair of starry eyes to mine, said:

"Helen!"

"Yes, Nora!" I replied, quietly, trying to school my rebellious heart to bear quietly the news her eyes told me she had to tell.

"I have something to tell you."

"Indeed!"

"Yes! Something I have not yet told the aunts."

"No? What is it, dear?" I said, gently, feeling a strong desire to put her from me and shriek, "Don't tell me! don't tell me! I can't bear to hear that you are going to be his wife."

But I conquered the wild impulse, and sat immovable as a statue.

"It—it is something that will astonish you," turning her head away half shyly, and playing with a tassel on my gown.

"Will it? Why?" I managed to ask.

"I—I—have had an offer of marriage, Helen."

"An offer of marriage?—a child like you?" I managed to murmur.

"Yes! From whom do you think?"

"I—I—don't—know."

It was my turn to falter now.

"Doctor Hadlow."

"Ah!"

Though I ought to have been prepared for it, the words cut me like a knife.

"You are surprised?"

"A little," I replied, looking down at the winsome face upraised to mine, whose beauty had robbed me of what I most prized on earth.

"So am I!" she laughed gleefully. "He is so big, so strong, and sedate and serious; it does seem funny that he should choose me, want me to be his wife."

"Have—have—you accepted him?" I asked, faintly.

"Why, yes, of course, Helen!"

"Why 'of course,' Nora?"

"Because men are so scarce here, dear. I may never have another chance of becoming a matron, and father won't let me go out to India to him, and it is so dull at Skerryvora!"

"And is that why you are going to marry him?" I asked, in amazement.

"Partly," she rejoined, indifferently.

"Don't—don't you love him, Nora?" I cried, vehemently, seizing both dimpled hands in mine, and holding them tightly.

"Well, I don't know. Don't look so horrified, my old sober-sides of a cousin. I hardly know what love is yet! Perhaps—it will come after?"

"Isn't this a pretty ring?" she went on, twisting a flashing diamond round and round on her dainty finger. "I feel so proud and important! I wonder what the aunts will say? Do you think they will refuse their consent to our marriage?"

"I don't think so!" I almost groaned. "They think very highly of Doctor Hadlow. Your father is more likely to object than they!"

"Oh, dad has given Aunt Jane full powers to dispose of my hand, though, of course, my heart is at my own disposal!" with a trill of gay laughter.

"He is coming here to-night to learn his fate from the powers that be. How I wonder what Aunt Jane will say! I feel almost afraid—quite nervous!"

However, she need not have felt any fear. The powers were propitious. Everybody approved of John Hadlow as a husband for Nora, and a free and full consent was given to their engagement.

"Dear me!" murmured Aunt Anne, "it quite flurries me, makes me feel young again!"

"Then it only makes you feel what you look. My dear madame!" exclaimed Doctor Peters, to whom the remark was made, gallantly. "And I think it would be well for some of us who are older to follow these young folks' example and get engaged."

But unfortunately at this juncture Aunt Jane came into the room and spoiled sport, and nothing more came then of the old doctor's gallantry.

The months that followed were very trying for me—torturing. John Hadlow was infatuated, and at no pains whatever to hide his infatuation. He was wrapped up, body and soul, in the fair girl who had accepted his love and wore his ring, and promised to become his wife.

He was just civil to me—no more. He quite forgot that he had ever looked tenderly into my eyes, and held my hand, and whispered tender speeches to me. All his past life seemed swept away in the mad delight of the present.

He lived on her smiles, hung on her words, devoted every moment he could spare from his patients to her pleasure; was tender, devoted, forbearing, kind to the giddy, thoughtless creature, who seemed to have laid such a spell on his senses to have bound him to her by unbreakable bonds.

I suppose that winter was a happy time to

them; at any rate, there seemed to be no cloud on their happiness, both looked radiant. But with the early spring came a summons for him.

His widowed mother, who lived with a married daughter in Scotland, was dying, and longed to see him ere she closed her eyes on all things earthly.

Of course, he responded to the summons. He was far too good a son to refuse a dying mother's request; and yet I saw his heart was torn with bitter and conflicting emotions, and that he was terribly reluctant to leave Nora, bright, thoughtless, childish Nora.

"Take care of my little love for me, Miss Helen," he said to me in a voice of deep emotion the morning of his departure. "You love her, and I know will care for her."

"I will do my best," I answered, constrainedly.

"That contents me. I can trust you," he said, gratefully, stooping and kissing my hand.

Heavens! How the touch of his lips seemed to burn my flesh. I pulsed and throbbed for hours afterwards with a guilty sort of pleasure at the contact.

Fool that I was! poor, miserable, weak fool, to care so much, so very much, for a man who was to be another woman's husband!

Nora took his departure rather coolly, and employed herself in making some pretty new gowns for the coming summer, which was to be very gay, for Lady Louisa and Sir Percy Masham were coming from Italy and Penvale House was to be thrown open once more.

My cousin took a great interest in all the preparations going on at the big house, and we often, very often, by her desire, walked over there, and strolled about the park and gardens, and through the pretty model village that looked so healthy, clean, and prosperous, and spoke so well for the young owner.

Penvale House was of red brick, in the Tudor fashion, with a quaint central porch, arched windows, that twinkled in the sunlight against the heavy red, and was partly overgrown with ivy that clung and twined round its many fantastic chimneys lavishly.

The gardens were quaint and old world. Giant oaks and elms centuries old threw dusky shadows on the trim turf, and innumerable sweet-smelling flowers of a bygone age bloomed in company with some of their more modern brethren nine months out or the twelve.

There were vineries there, melon pits, forcing house, conservatories, a herony, a park where the graceful, wild-eyed deer couched amongst the bracken, preserves where gorgeous pheasants were reared at enormous cost, splendid stables and kennels, in fact, everything that a rich man gathers about him in the country.

Nora seemed fascinated by the place, and listened eagerly to all that was said about the young baronet.

He bore a high character in the neighbourhood. Mothers and maids alike looked with favourable eyes on this *bon parti*, and, moreover, *bon garçon*.

However, he had been adamant to their tender glances, and though always attentive and polite to ladies, young or old, never overstepped the bounds laid down by the strictest prude, nor flirted, nor ogled, nor squeezed soft hands, nor gazed into soft eyes, nor did any of those things he might naturally have been expected to do, and which the non-performance of considerably disappointed the fair ones of the neighbourhood.

"He is the coldest man I ever met," declared one fast and frisky matron, who

would willingly have dragged him captive at her chariot wheels.

"He has no eyes for good looks," smirked an unappropriated blessing of forty, who was quite ready to exchange single blessedness for double cursedness.

"Must have some secret love affair," sniffed a matron, the mother of five bouncing girls, who had tried her best to catch the master of Penvale House for one or other of her progeny.

Such were the remarks passed on him, many of which came to his ears, and made him laugh heartily, my aunts told me, for he was one of their favourites, and Lady Louisa often invited them to the House when she was in residence there, for she found them ready and sympathetic listeners to all her ailments and troubles.

I had often been in the old Tudor mansion, Nora never. She had been a mere child before they left for Italy, busy with her governess and lessons, and Aunt Jane had never permitted her to accept any of the general and inclusive invitations given by Lady Louisa to all the inmates of Skerryvoran.

Her curiosity, therefore, in Sir Percy Masham and his home was at fever heat, and she waited with barely concealed anxiety for their arrival, and somewhat to my astonishment bought a lot of new hats and ribbons and shoes, for her father's allowance was liberal in the extreme, and she had treble what most girls of her age have to spend on furbelows and personal adornments, and had never to deny herself of anything, and the stock of pretty things she laid in was astonishing.

But I, not quite understanding the gay, thoughtless creature, was foolishly under the impression that she was doing it with a view to further fascinating and subjugating her betrothed.

CHAPTER V.

"THEY have come!"

I was sitting in the garden one warm April afternoon, the lilac was blowing, pink and white apple blossom glittered amongst the green leaves, and the beeches showed their dark purple foliage, and the limes displayed a most beautiful livery, and the blackthorns were snowy, and the laburnums golden, the lute-voiced blackbird and the soaring lark sang gaily, and the rakish cuckoo called his mocking notes, ringing and vibrating on the soft, balmy air, and all nature was bright and fair and gay with that sense of juvenescence which she most plainly shows in the "fickle fourth month of the year."

I started at being addressed, and looking up from my book, found Nora standing before me.

"They have come," she repeated, nodding her bright head.

"Who have come?" I asked, slightly bewildered.

"Lady Louisa and Sir Percy."

"Oh!"

"I am so glad," she cried, gleefully.

"What a remarkable interest you take in the Mashams." I remarked, looking at her closely.

"Of course."

"Why of course?"

"Well, I hardly think you need ask. There are such a dull set of old fogies here that one is likely to die of ennui. Perhaps they will make the place a little gay and endurable."

"You forget Lady Louisa is an invalid."

"She is much—much better. As nearly well as she ever can be."

"Who told you?" I asked in astonishment, for she spoke with a certainty that showed she had her information from a good source.

"Sir Percy," she murmured, casting down her eyes, while a lovely blush suffused her cheeks.

"Sir Percy!" I echoed in amazement. "How? When? Where?"

"In Three Acre Lane, this afternoon."

"But—but," I stammered, "you don't know him?"

"Oh, yes I do," she replied, coolly. "He often used to put me on the head five years ago when I was a little girl, and give me *dragées* and packets of *bonbons* when Pattison took me out, and we used to meet him in the lanes and meadows, and he often said it was a shame Miss Trotpole didn't let me go up to the House, that I was far too pretty a child to be shut up in the schoolroom."

"Oh, indeed!" I managed to ejaculate.

"And, Helen, will you believe it, he knew me at once this afternoon, and jumped off his horse and shook hands, saying he was quite sure I was little Nora Hilliard grown up into a young lady? An oh! Helen, he is so handsome. Such lovely brown eyes, such a moustache, such beautiful black hair, and so tall and elegant. I have never seen anyone like him or to be compared to him."

"Not even Dr. Hadlow?" I put in sarcastically.

"Oh, no. John is not handsome nor sentimental-looking. Sir Percy is both, and such an aristocrat, and his clothes fit beautifully. I do like to see a man well-dressed."

"Really," I said, severely, "I think your Parisian education has not done you much good. You talk too much about men, and I believe you have not written to your intended for three days. I should think you had better go and do it now instead of letting your thoughts stray to other men, in whom you possibly can have no legitimate interest."

I spoke very bitterly, I felt so sore. She seemed to hold the treasure that I coveted—John Hadlow's love—so lightly. The child did not speak, but she raised her great blue eyes and looked at me for fully a moment, then she turned and went slowly towards the House.

From that day a chasm yawned between us, separating our lives, and the affection felt for each other appeared to lessen, while she no longer confided all her thoughts and hopes to me with childish enthusiasm as she had done.

I regretted the change, but was powerless to alter the state of affairs by a hair's breadth.

A few days later Lady Louisa drove over to Skerryvoran, and tendered an invitation for Nora to go to Penvale House and stay with her. She seemed quite fascinated by the bright, lovely girl, and yet I thought Sir Percy might have prompted the invitation.

My aunts accepted it. Indeed, they seemed pleased and flattered at it, and as she had plenty of pretty new things there was nothing to hinder her going. She went the next day.

My heart misgave me as I saw her drive off, sitting in the carriage beside Lady Louisa, her fair face bright with blushes, dimpling with smiles raised to the young Baronet, who rode at her side by the carriage, managing his spirited horse with infinite grace and skill.

John Hadlow had left his love in my care, but what could I do? I was helpless. I could not prevent her going to the House. I could not prevent Sir Percy admiring her, or her giddy head being turned by his admiration; and if my aunts approved it was not for me to set my opinion against theirs, so, I say again, I was helpless.

We all missed her very much. Skerry-

the opening chapters of "A GOLDEN DESTINY."

voran seemed dull enough without her ringing laughter and gay voice, and we were glad when she came back ten days later.

Only ten days! and yet what a change was wrought in the child. Her cheeks wore a deeper bloom, her eyes were full of a soft, dreamy light. She sighed often, she seemed suddenly to have matured from a beautiful child into a most lovely woman, with all a woman's capacity for loving and suffering.

I guessed, with sinking heart and a great sense of pity, what had changed her, guessed that she had learned in those ten days the great lesson of life, the master passion to which all others play but a subordinate part. It was all conjecture. She did not say a word to me, only shunned me, and appeared shy and ill at ease in my presence.

All my worst fears were realised at a dance given at Penvale House a few days later.

Nora looked most lovely. Her filmy black dress set off the bronze hair and rich complexion admirably. There was a flush on her delicate cheeks, a starlike gleam in her eyes, as Percy Masham took her in his arms and glided over the floor with her to the strains of some soul-subduing melancholy waltz.

I noticed how closely he held her, how tenderly he looked at his companion, and I felt he was getting mad over Nora!—mad with love, and that in his madness he would forget all save the alluring object of his passion, and I doubted her. I doubted her having strength to resist the passionate pleading of the handsome man at her side.

Constancy, honour, faith, what were they when weighed in the balance against love? Nothing. "Such a lord is love," a lord no young girl can resist. I felt she would not resist, and in my anguish, and my wish to save John Hadlow pain, I glided after them when they went out on the terrace, and stood in the shadow of a statue.

"I shall never let you go again, Nora," Sir Percy was saying, in impassioned tones, as he stood beside her looking down at the face etherealised to an unearthly loveliness by the moonbeams.

"Not let me go, Sir Percy!" she murmured, as though not understanding.

"No. Keep you here until you are my wife!"

"But I cannot be, I cannot be!" she cried, quickly.

"Do you not love me?" he asked, with seductive tenderness.

"Yes, I love you," she sighed.

"Then you will be my wife, dearest?"

"No. It is—impossible!" she replied, brokenly.

"Is anything impossible to love?" he asked, passionately, trying to gaze into the eyes shyly turned away from him.

"This must be."

"Will you condemn me to a life of misery? Think, sweetheart, how wretched we shall both be."

"But—my promise," she moaned. "I cannot break it."

"Not even for my sake?" throwing an arm round her and drawing her closer to him.

"Oh, Percy, do not tempt me. Faith and honour bind me to him."

"Will you speak of such an empty tie when you are mine, and mine alone?" stooping to kiss the quivering lips that were not turned away from his eager, passionate caress.

"He loves me," she faltered.

"And so do I. What is his love to mine? Oh, Nora, do not blast and lay waste my whole life. I cannot live without you."

"You must, you must. In pity let me go!" striving feebly to free herself from the strong arms clasped round her.

"I will not let you go. Listen! You love me, do you not?"

"Yes. Better than anything else in the world!" moaned the poor child, laying her head on his breast, as though, storm-tossed and weary, there she could find rest.

"And you do not love John Hadlow?"

"No. I know now I do not love him."

How I trembled as I heard these words, so incomprehensible to me.

"Then have you ever thought what a sin you would be committing if you married him loving me?"

"Oh, Percy!" she gasped, "no."

You would be. Your every thought is mine. Your heart is mine, and you must be mine, too. Put your hand in mine, darling, and swear to be my wife."

But instead she looked at him with dim, uncertain eyes, and swaying away from him, fell prone along the marble terrace—cold, white, insensible.

He gathered her up in his arms and strode off quickly to the house, while I stood staring stupidly at the spot where she had fallen. I seemed to be spell-bound and without the power of volition, and when at last I recovered my senses and returned to the ball-room I found my aunts ready to go, and anxious at my non-appearance.

They told me Nora had been taken ill, and was going to remain the night at Penvale House, and I made no remark. What was the use. What could I do to stem the mighty current of Percy Masham and Nora Hilliard's love? I was but a weak, helpless woman, and I could not save the man I loved from pain and sorrow; fate was too strong for me; but I knew intuitively that we should not see Nora again until she was Lady Masham.

And I was right.

Three days later Aunt Jane received a letter from the baronet, telling how he had made Nora his wife, how deeply and devotedly they loved each other, and asking her to forgive him and his wife for having married in such a fashion. It was a straightforward, manly letter, but it softened Miss Trotpole's heart not one whit. Her creed of honour was stern, rigid, upright; she was shocked, horrified, and refused to receive Lady Masham or her husband, and did not permit either of her sisters to do so, even though Lady Louisa pleaded their cause strongly, for she very soon forgave the lovers, and openly declared she adored her son's young wife.

But it was not until a year later, when Nora's baby came and her life was in danger, that Miss Trotpole relented and allowed us all to go to Penvale House to see the culprit invalid, and amicable relations were restored between the two families.

In the meantime John Hadlow returned from the North. His mother rallied a little at the coming of the warm weather, and he came once more South to look after his sick people and his love.

I was in the garden on the morning that he first turned his steps to Skerryvoran. It was barely a week after Nora's marriage, and he knew nothing of it. He came blithely along, eager to meet the girl he loved, but instead of her rose-bud winsome face to greet him, in the porch was Miss Jane, looking severe and grim and ashamed.

I never knew what she said to him. Whether she tried to soften the blow, or told him the truth in plain, unvarnished terms, but I do know that when he came once more down the garden path he was a changed man. He looked ten years older. The happy eager look had left his face. It looked cold, frozen, as though a death blow

had been dealt him, and as he passed me with blind unseeing eyes I heard a heavy sob burst from his bloodless lips, and knew what terrible agony he suffered. However, he was no coward. He did not run away from Standron. He took up the burden of life and bore it manfully, and many and many a dying lips blessed him, and many and many a squalid home was the brighter and better for his presence.

I believe he met Nora sometimes in society, but I never saw them together, for which I was thankful. He came often to Skerryvoran, and I saw the cloud lift gradually from off his kind and genial face, until at the end of two years he was his old self again, and seemed in no wise the worse that Lady Masham had jilted him.

Then a thing took place which electrified us all.

Doctor Peters proposed to Aunt Anne, and she actually accepted him, though Aunt Jane told her there "was no fool like an old fool."

Seeing the mature lovers together, and also seeing how much attached they were, and how eminently well suited to each other, I could not think that they were fools, and I was glad when the day came that made them one, and released dear Aunt Anne from the constant and scornful remarks of her elder sister.

After the wedding was over, and the bride and her groom, both beaming with happiness and pride, had driven off on the first stage of their honeymoon, I retired to Aunt Mary's little cosy sanctum under the eaves, where a cheerful fire was burning, for the autumn day was chilly, and stood with one foot on the fender, looking down into the heart of the glowing embers.

I don't know how long I stood there, lost in a somewhat gloomy retrospect, when I suddenly became conscious that I was not alone. Looking up with a start I found Doctor Hadlow beside me.

"Day dreaming, Helen?" he asked with a smile, drawing nearer, and looking down into my eyes. "Tell me your dreams?"

"They are not worth telling," I answered, hurriedly, blushing furiously, and fancying he must hear the mad pulsings of my heart.

"No?" with a ring of disappointment in his tone. "Do you know I fancied, nay, I hoped, they might be of me?"

"Doctor Hadlow!" I exclaimed, in indignant surprise.

"Were they not, Helen, my Helen?" trying to take my hand. "Now, confess!"

"Is it possible that you have forgotten?" I asked, amazedly, for I had thought his love for Nora would end only with his life.

"No; I have not forgotten; but I am cured of my folly," he returned, pointedly.

"I suffered horribly for a while; then a sweet face came between me and my pain—a face that I know now I loved always—before I saw that fairer one that bewitched me for a while, and blinded me to the true state of my heart. The face was yours, Helen, and I want you to give me the right always to have it with me—always to be able to look at it, my noble darling—always to have you beside me, to encourage me to better things. Helen, will you be my wife? Will you forgive the past, and be all in all to me?"

And for answer I put my hand in his, and said, "Yes. I am not your first love," I added, half wistfully, looking up into his dear face.

"Yes; my first and my last love, and my dearest," he said, tenderly, as he drew me within the circle of his supporting arms, and pressed me to his heart, while our lips met in a long, fond kiss, the pledge and seal of our betrothal.

[THE END.]

Society

THE King is really anxious to have a residence in Wales. Several different places have been mentioned as likely to suit, and Colonel Davidson recently paid a visit to Craig-y-Nos, which Madame Patti wishes to sell.

MANY people may remember how Queen Alexandra, as Princess of Wales, had a very favourite white cat which was her constant companion, and even went with its Royal mistress on visits to country houses. It is not, however, generally known that Princess Victoria is particularly interested in cats. She has several very fine specimens, and among her pets are some very rare blue kittens. Her Royal Highness has never yet consented to exhibit, and naturally it is the great ambition of the lady patronesses of the various cat clubs to induce her to do so.

PRINCESS FREDERICK CHARLES of Hesse, the youngest sister of the German Emperor, who recently gave birth to twin sons, for the second time; and now, though married only just over eight years, she has given six little princes for the defence of the Fatherland. The new birth raises the number of descendants of the late Queen Victoria to ninety, of whom seventy-seven are now alive. The proportion between the sexes in the Prussian Royal Family is most remarkable, the twenty grand-children of the Empress Frederick numbering seventeen boys and only three girls. Yet so compensating is the law of average that, in spite of this extraordinary phenomenon, of the living descendants of Queen Victoria thirty-six only are males and forty-one females.

MANY people are complaining that the maintenance of Balmoral and Osborne should be thrown upon the King, who will probably never use them himself, and it is thought that it will be a serious burden on posterity, if, on the death of every king and queen, the taxpayer has to keep up these private residences. This, however, is, and long has been, precisely the condition of things. William III. acquired Lord Nottingham's house at Kensington, because he thought Whitehall disagreed with him, and hence, Kensington Palace. Again, the Duke of Buckinghamshire's house at Pimlico was bought as dower house for Queen Charlotte, and hence, Buckingham Palace. As a result, three Royal palaces, never lived in by the Sovereign during the last three reigns, viz., Hampton Court, Kensington, and St. James's—have been turned into asylums for well-born pensioners, and are maintained by the nation for that purpose.

PRINCESS HENRY OF BATTENBERG is about to visit her sister the Empress Frederick, who is really no better in health, although she manages to get out in the grounds every day, and her cheerfulness and courage help her to bear a life of almost constant pain.

AN office of considerable importance at Buckingham Palace is that of State house-keeper. The control of the large staff of all women servants, excepting the kitchen staff, and also the seeing that the rooms for Royal and other visitors are the perfection of comfort, are among its many responsibilities; but its privileges are the receiving of all Royal guests and the conducting of them to their suites of apartments, and on their departure receiving beautiful souvenirs of these visits, which are often of great value. Besides this, the State house-keeper has the use of charming rooms on the ground floor of the Palace facing the Mall, and a very handsome salary and pension.

Statistics

THE greatest depth in the Pacific Ocean, so far as sounded, is in north latitude 11.24, east longitude 143.16, where it has a depth of 26,850 feet, or more than five miles. The greatest depth in the Atlantic Ocean is about 90 miles off the Island of St. Thomas, W. I., where it is 23,250 feet deep.

THE Washington Monument, in Washington, D. C., is 555 feet high, being the loftiest structure in the world, except the Eiffel Tower, in Paris. The base is 55 feet square, with walls 15 feet thick. The exterior is of crystal Maryland marble, while the interior, lighted by electricity, is occupied by a stairway of 800 steps, extending from the bottom to the top, and which makes the ascent in seven minutes.

THE celebrated column known as Pompey's Pillar stands on an eminence near Alexandria, Egypt, about 1,800 feet south of the walls of that city. It is a monolith of red granite of the Corinthian order, and is erected upon a pedestal. Its total height is 98 feet 9 inches; shaft, 73 feet; 29 feet 8 inches in circumference. It is supposed to record the conquest of Alexandria by Diocletian, A. D., 296.

Gems

NEVER judge a man's actions until you know his motives.

A PROMISE should be given with caution and kept with care.

EACH hour comes with some little bagot of God's will fastened upon its back.

DIGNITY consists not in possessing honors but in the consciousness that we deserve them.

ALL indulgence of sadness that has the slightest tincture of discontent ought to be a grave delinquency.

DEPEND on no man, on no friend but him who can depend on himself. He only who acts conscientiously towards himself will act so towards others.

As a Man Thinketh.

"As a man thinketh, so he is." The mental attitude of a person is the key to a whole life. Victor Hugo says: "Certain thoughts are prayers. There are moments when, whatever the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees." We are what we desire to be, what we struggle to obtain. Whether we are able to grasp the object we reach for or not, the imprint of the struggle remains, and even if we seek to erase it as time rolls on, to make room for a more cherished ideal, the soul's canvas is so stamped that no other picture is ever so clear again. Every thought has an influence for good or evil; we either progress or deteriorate, as the case may be. Our minds are the films which reproduce the result of our actions. We have only to catch a glimpse of our inner self, to note well the tendencies of our nature, measure our capacity for good or evil, to have a perfect representation of our real selves. We can never determine the possibilities of a life until every opportunity has been tested. It is in reaching out for something higher and better that we find the special sphere for which we are fitted. We say many times that people are controlled by their hearts. The heart struggles against the influences that are closing about it, but the mind gains control at last, and the life takes on the colouring of thoughts that are uppermost.

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UNSEEN FIRES.

BY EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

Valentine Eyre is riding through a forest in Spain when his attention is arrested by the sight of the gipsy girl Zitella. Valentine ascertains that she is betrothed to Hermann, a member of the gipsy band and he would spare her if possible from a loveless marriage. He undertakes to adopt Zitella, and she is sent to England to be educated. Valentine's wife is reported dead, but in reality she still lives. Zitella's education being completed she determines to use the influence of Valentine's position and power to further her own ambitious ends. Summoned to his father's death bed, Valentine learns that he has no right to any name but his mother's, and the estates being entailed go to his brother Hermann. On his return home he finds that Zitella has fled, and he is now searching for her abroad. His first impulse on meeting her is to kill her for her unfaithfulness. Valentine spares her life, however, only to be stabbed with his own dagger and as the hand of Hermann. Meanwhile Churchill Penance has fallen in love with the beautiful Inez, and realises too late that he has been duped. He returns to England and endeavours to live down the memory of the past, and in doing so is helped by the kindly ministrations of the wife and children of Valentine Eyre. Romola, their daughter, has grown into a beautiful young girl. What more natural than that the impressionable Churchill should fall in love with her. Nothing has been heard of Valentine since the day he was wounded by Hermann and decoyed away, but his friends have not forgotten him, and it is in a fearful changed condition that he is ultimately found.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Do not be afraid," said Blanche gently, addressing Churchill, as she bent over the prostrate form of Martin. "Do not reproach yourself," she continued, "he is not hurt or ill, but this joy is keener than, pain and he has fainted beneath it; but with such remedies as I have here he will soon come round."

As she spoke Blanche produced from a sort of pouch which hung from her side a tiny phial which contained, as she explained, a wonderful concoction of herbs.

"In my daily rounds among the sick and poor," said Blanche, "I find it well to be always provided with these things, and have restored many an one with this particular concoction."

After which she proceeded to pour a few drops of the liquid down the throat of the unconscious man, who soon began to show signs of returning life and memory, and as the warming liquid began to course more freely through his veins, full power of mind and body returned. Valentine sat up, and grasping Blanche's hands in his, implored of her, almost with tears, to tell him that all he had heard was not a dream.

"It was no dream," replied Blanche, gravely, "and if you do not fear to enter this fever-stricken house you will find your master, but you must be strong and calm, for it is not the old Valentine Eyre you will see, but one who has been foully dealt with, and whose wrongs you must avenge!"

"Oh, my master!" cried Valentine, "only let me see his face that I may make sure all this is no dream!" and then with the help of Churchill Penance, the poor creature rose to his feet.

In breathless silence the trio entered the house, and, at the first glance, Churchill saw that it was the abode of every sort of crime and desperate deed.

He thought shudderingly of another house in this very town, and how he had been bewitched and fatally blinded by the loveliness of Inez Valdez. But now that the glamour was over it seemed quite natural to connect her with the mysterious disappearance of Valentine Eyre.

They passed into a room which smelled strongly of the disinfectant fluids that

Blanche had taken the precaution to scatter freely over the floor and scanty furniture. And here there was a bed containing a silent form covered with a cloth, which Blanche carefully removed, and then waving the others back, she said, gently,—

"This poor wretch was in the pay of Hermann Eyre, Valentine's brother, and for twelve years he did his wicked work, but you must try and forgive him now, for he was won by the kindness which I had shown him for the past six weeks, and before he died, half-an-hour ago, he made full confession, but it was," she added, "that his comrades in crime had fled from their stronghold as soon as the fever visited it, otherwise Valentine Eyre might have been doomed to die in the cellar, which has been his prison for the last twelve years."

Both Churchill and Martin glanced at one another in silence, for what they had heard seemed too horrible for belief. But the twelve years of her labours among the poor and wretched had accustomed Blanche to such things, and it was almost without emotion that she dropped the sheet once more over the dead man's face.

"We must not judge him," she said, "for he has gone to answer for his sins before the Judge of all men; but now we must care for the living," and then, pointing to a certain square in the stone flooring, she continued, in tones of forced calm,—

"Valentine Eyre's prison is just beneath us; if you would reach him you must remove that flag."

The spell which bound the two men seemed broken by these words, and together they sprang forward, aiding one another to remove the heavy stone, which yielded slowly to their efforts, and when at last the way of descent was clear, Churchill stepped back, delaying as if to wipe the damp of exhaustion from his brow, but in reality to let the two who had loved Valentine Eyre descend by themselves.

He watched them disappear through the aperture, and standing there felt inclined to believe that it was all some wild delusion of his fancy, but a cry from the vault beneath assured him that all was only too real, and rousing himself in the belief that his assistance might be required, he began slowly to descend the stone steps until he found himself in a horrible damp-smelling cellar, lighted by an oil lamp, which hung suspended from the ceiling, and here Churchill saw a sight which to his dying day was never forgotten.

Blanche's calm was broken up completely, and the long-suppressed love and anguish of her heart was being poured forth in a torrent of prayers and tears, whose passionate force caused Martin to stand by as if he were a pitiful onlooker of this most sad and touching scene.

Blanche was kneeling on the damp ground beside the couch on which Valentine Eyre was lying. Her cloak was flung back, and her arms were stretched out encircling the man, who was gazing at her with wide open eyes, but who did not seem to comprehend one of her tender words, or be in the least way moved by her tears and passionate gestures.

"He is conscious," thought Churchill, "but the poor fellow's memory is gone; the wonder is that he lives."

And as he glanced at the white, emaciated face, with its thick frame of unkempt hair, there surged up in the young man's breast a

wave of pity and passionate desire to avenge this crime.

He clenched his hands together, and something like an imprecation broke from his lips as his eyes fell on a table near the couch, and saw the loathsome mass which seemed to be the remains of Valentine Eyre's last meal.

But then, remembering that this was a time for prompt action and not angry thoughts, Churchill stepped up to Martin, down whose cheeks tears were beginning to roll thick and fast, and laying his hand on the valot's shoulder, the young man said in strong, clear tones,—

"We have discovered the most heartless and brutal crime which has ever been committed, but remember that if we would save the victim of it, there is not a moment to be lost. So you, Martin, must help me to prepare a litter, on which we can remove Valentine Eyre; and when we have summoned medical aid we must set the local authorities on the track of the gang of thieves and murderers who seem to have made this place their stronghold."

So speaking, Churchill proceeded to climb once more into upper air, when he was followed, mechanically, by Martin, who, in the deadly fear that his master's reason would never be recovered, seemed incapable of action until Churchill quickened him into life and action with some words of Hermann and vengeance.

Between them, out of such materials as came to hand, the two men improvised a litter, and on this, when they had with some difficulty borne him from his prison, Valentine Eyre was laid, when, accompanied by Blanche, they left the house with its dead occupant, securing the door firmly behind them, when they carried their burden to the rooms which Churchill and Martin had engaged for themselves on the previous night, and to which after some little parley and a gift of money, Valentine Eyre was admitted by the landlord, who had a marked dread of all manner of sickness.

From this place Blanche sent word to the Convent to say that she had taken up a case of sickness which would, in all probability, keep her occupied for many weeks; and when both Martin and Churchill Penance had gone in different ways—one in search of medical aid, the other to procure some things which were necessary for the sick man's comfort, and left her alone with her old love—Blanche found it hard to act as Sister Bertha should act.

She knelt by the bed in which they had laid Valentine Eyre, and told herself, with the most bitter upbraiding, that it was her selfish love which had brought him to this.

She pressed the pale, bloodless hands in hers, and dropped tears and kisses of passionate love and sorrow on the lips that heeded her not.

"Oh, Heaven hear me!" she prayed, wildly; "let me suffer alone for this, it was my fault—my sin—let me only eat the bitter fruit!"

There were steps outside the corridor, and once more Blanche Hastings was Sister Bertha. Dropping the hand she had clasped so wildly, she rose and straightened herself, and drew down the window-blinds, that the traces of her emotion might not be seen on her cheek; but as these preparations were completed she remembered that there had been witnesses to her passionate outcry a little while ago, and then the door was gently opened, and Churchill entered with a very old man, whom he introduced as Dr. Maynard, and who, as it turned out, was not unknown to Sister Bertha, of the Convent of St. Catherine's.

He had stood by her side at more than



HERMANN STOOD FOR A MOMENT AS IF TURNED TO STONE, AND THEN, WITHOUT A WORD, FELL FORWARD TO THE GROUND!

one sick bed, and seen her pass through harrowing scenes without emotion; but now as Churchill, at a sign from him, drew up the blinds, and the light fell on the nun's pale face, even the doctor's dim eyes could see that it bore the trace of bitter tears. And at this the old man was very much surprised, for, beyond the fact that his services were urgently needed, Churchill Penance had discreetly told him nothing.

"You are over-wrought, sister," said the doctor, in a kind tone, as he took Blanche's hand; and schooling herself to the manner of the convent, Blanche replied,—

"I have been up all night, and stood by a death bed this morning; but never mind me, doctor, you are wanted there."

And she pointed to the bed from which, after a few moments of puzzled silence, Doctor Maynard recoiled in horrified unbelief.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, at last, "is it possible that I am looking at Valentine Eyre?"

"Then you know him?" asked Blanche, breaking the silence which followed these words.

"I know him well," said the doctor, slowly, "if indeed this mummy-like being is Valentine Eyre; but I can scarcely believe it!" he added, with returning horror. "How comes it about that he is here in this terrible condition?"

Blanche kept silence. She felt that it was not her place to utter a word; but there was no need for her to speak, for as soon as Churchill Penance could find a voice he poured forth the whole story of crime and falsehood which had brought Valentine Eyre to this state; but when he reproached himself in the most bitter terms as being the chief cause of all the misery, Dr. Maynard shook his head.

"No, my friend," he said, sadly, "I'm only afraid that you wrong yourself when you take the blame of this. It would be hard," he added, gravely, "to say who was the cause of this evil; but I am afraid that I have more to answer for than any of you can guess."

"You!" exclaimed Blanche and Churchill in one breath, and both looked at the doctor with wondering eyes.

"Yes," he went on. "You are both surprised. All the same, what I say is perfectly true. I knew Valentine Eyre long ago, and with the best intentions in the world I counselled him to take a step from which all this evil has sprung, and not only that," added the doctor, "but later on I entered into a plot against him. However, the story is too long to be told now, and unless I attend to my patient it may never be told at all!"

As he spoke the good old doctor went to Valentine Eyre's side; but he had scarcely bent over the bed when the door opened to admit another physician, who had been summoned by the anxious Martin, and who, being also English, was now warmly welcomed by his colleague, who saw that this case was one which required the utmost care and skill.

The two medical men, therefore, entered into a hurried explanation; after which Churchill and Martin found themselves obliged to leave the room, the door of which was mercilessly shut against them for the space of an hour, at the end of which Dr. Maynard appeared, and, to the indescribable joy of both, assured them that nothing but time and care was needed for the physical and mental recovery of Valentine Eyre, whereupon poor Martin relieved his over-wrought feelings with a flood of tears—

a weakness of which he seemed very much ashamed—and for which he tried to apologise by saying repeatedly to Churchill,—

"Oh! sir, you will think me a weak, doting old man, but I have hungered and thirsted for some news of my master through these last twelve years, and all this is so strange and sudden that if I didn't find some way of showing my feelings, I believe I should go mad."

"What nonsense, Martin!" rejoined Churchill, in a choky tone, that showed how strong was his own emotion. "Why, man," he went on, "your tears only prove that you are the best fellow in the world; but remember," he added, sternly, "that when the proper time of reckoning comes, no mercy must be shown to those who played this foul trick on your master!"

"Oh, no fear of that, sir!" rejoined Martin, and he straightened himself, and put on an expression which was supposed to indicate the most fierce and unrelenting persecution of Valentine Eyre's false brother, but in his heart Martin dreaded to think of vengeance. It seemed unworthy, he thought, when his master had been restored to him; but he had not the courage to remind Churchill Penance that words of forgiveness best suited the lips of those who had been shown great mercy, but he did manage to say very humbly,—

"I am so thankful, sir, for my master's life being spared to me, that I can't find it in my heart to think badly towards anyone, and perhaps the Almighty is better pleased when we leave the reckoning to him. At all events, you'll agree with me, Mr. Penance, that as we all need mercy and hope for pardon it is better not to be too hard."

"You are right, Martin," replied

Churchill, quickly and heartily, but every word had pierced him like a sword thrust, and he turned away feeling that he had learned a lesson which would never be forgotten.

He thought of his own sinful past, during the madness of which every scruple of honour and conscience had been made subservient to the gratification of the moment, and in fearful tones Churchill Penance asked pardon of Heaven for his presumption, and mercy for the future, not only for himself, but for those whom he no longer dared to judge or condemn; and in that hour, if Zitella could have knelt before Churchill's feet and asked pardon for her crimes against him, she would have been mercifully and freely forgiven.

Three days passed away, during which Blanche treasured each moment as misers treasure the gold which is dearer to them than life.

Three days, during which Blanche lived in a dream of bliss too great for reality, like one who passes through a half-waking vision of some fairy scene.

She feared almost to breathe or move lest her eyes should open to find all the beauty vanished.

While outwardly she was Sister Bertha, calm and unemotional, almost callous, those who watched her might have said her heart and brain were in a ferment of delicious joy beyond all power of description.

At the most the hope of Blanche's heart through long years had been to kneel once before she died at the feet of Valentine Eyre, and confess the part which she had taken against him, and win in return the words of forgiveness which, as a generous man, he could not refuse.

"They were," over and over again she had told herself, "the least he could give, the most she could expect."

Over and over again she had rehearsed this part in fancy, had knelt and breathed her confession, and having won forgiveness and a kind word, such as the heart of a noble man can frame, she had pictured herself going forth on her way unto the end, desolate and unblest, but freed from the burden of guilt and remorse.

For this Blanche had hoped, and no more; and now, oh! wondrous joy! it was her privilege to smooth Valentine's pillow, to hold the cup to his fevered lips, to spend her strength night and day in winning back the life which might, she hoped and prayed, be blessed and happy.

Poor Blanche! No wonder that she scarcely dared to breathe, lest all should prove an illusion.

So three days passed, and then both the doctors began to fear that they had been too sanguine, for it suddenly seemed as if no amount of care or skill could save Valentine Eyre, who was now the prey of a terrible fever, caught in the foul air of the place from which he had been rescued, and as Blanche stood by his bed and saw his emaciated form, and heard his wild, unintelligible ravings, it needed no medical knowledge to assure her that the victory of death over over life was all but won.

"If I could only give my life instead of his!" she wailed, piteously.

And as he entered the room noiselessly, Doctor Maynard heard the words, and wondered what they meant; but when he reached Blanche's side, he was at a loss, for no marble could be colder, more passionless than her face. When she laid her hand lightly on the sick man's brow its touch was like ice, and not the faintest trembling of those thin, white fingers spoke to Doctor Maynard of the fires which were raging in that pale, self-contained woman! but with his sad and varied knowledge of human life, the doctor could not be

long in finding a reason for the words which he had just heard, and in his own mind he came to the following very natural conclusion:—

"Poor Sister Bertha, poor soul! she is a comparatively young woman, and must have been once the possessor of rare beauty. No doubt with those eyes and that queenly form she wrung sighs from many a heart. But what sorrow caused her to turn from the world is none of my business, only I can see that the poor creature has found more than once that there is no more peace within the walls of a convent than without, and so I pity her from my heart for the mistake she has made, poor soul!" And here the doctor sighed, as he glanced at the face so white by contrast with the nun's black dress. "Poor soul!" he repeated, "it is no wonder that she is so weary of this shadow of a life, that she longs for the power to lay it down for anyone whose case seems less hopeless, though I am afraid that such prayers won't do much for Valentine Eyre." And then, remembering the purpose with which he had entered the room, the doctor abandoned his musing, and said, aloud,—

"You are a capital nurse, Sister Bertha, the best I have ever met; but I fear that as far as this poor fellow is concerned your labour is all in vain!"

"Oh, do not say so!" gasped Blanche, and withdrawing her hand from the sick man's brow, she turned towards the doctor a face which must have revealed all her secret. But Doctor Maynard had transferred his gaze to his patient, and so the love and despair in the woman's face were lost upon him; and, heedless of the pain he was inflicting, the doctor went on,—

"I would say anything sooner than this, Sister Bertha, for I have much to reproach myself with for Valentine Eyre's sake; but I fear there is nothing else to be said except this, that we made a mistake when we promised to pull him through; but though it seems that the poor fellow is doomed, nothing must be left undone. I wish," he continued, gloomily, "that we had moved him out into the country at first, then there might have been some chance, but here everything is against him. However, all that is useless now, and though he can only linger at the most for a few more days, I am going to make the only preparation which lies in my power, by telegraphing at once for his wife, so that the poor soul may have some chance of reconciliation before—"

But here Doctor Maynard suddenly paused, startled into silence by the pitiful cry which had broken from Sister Bertha's lips, and before he could speak again she had grasped his arm with her trembling hands, gazing at him the while with eyes full of wonder and anguish.

"His wife!" she gasped, wildly. "What do you mean when you say that you will telegraph for Valentine Eyre's wife? Surely he did not marry her, or another? Oh, for Heaven's sake explain! Tell me, who is Valentine Eyre's wife?"

Doctor Maynard was so astonished by this unexpected outbreak that for several moments he could not speak; but when Blanche began to repeat her wild entreaties he recovered his presence of mind, and, remembering his patient, implored her to be calm; and then unclasping her hands from his arm, he seated her in a chair, for she was trembling so violently that he feared if some support were not given her she must fall to the ground.

"Poor soul!" he said at last, very gently and pitifully, for he guessed now that there must be some more than common cause for her agitation. "Poor soul!" he repeated, "only be calm, and I will tell you all I know, which is this, that Valentine

Eyre's wife is alive and living in England with her children, who do not dream that she is their mother, because she came to them as governess, and under the name of Alingham—"

"But who was she? When did he marry her?" asked Blanche, tossed between hopes and fears which were equally cruel.

"Hush!" whispered the doctor, in low, cautious tones, "you forget our patient, for though he is unconscious, our voices may disturb him and heighten the fever," and having given this warning, the doctor went on to tell her word for word the story of Valentine Eyre's hasty marriage with his cousin Celia de Nunax, the unhappy misunderstandings which had arisen between the husband and wife, and lastly of the plot in which, against his better judgment, he had aided Celia, and on this the doctor dwelt long and bitterly, reproaching and upbraiding himself in the strongest terms for the part he had played.

"I do not blame poor Celia," said the doctor, in conclusion. "She was young and romantic, and with her love her husband's happiness came before everything. In the whole of it she had not a selfish thought; and the worst to be said is, that she made a great and grievous mistake; but I," he continued, sadly, "am bitterly to blame. I ought never to have yielded to her arguments and entreaties, and if I could not have dissuaded her from her rash folly, rather than consent to such deception, I should have sent for her husband and revealed all."

"It would have been well had you done so," replied Blanche, and the despairing tones of her voice haunted her listener for many a day, neither could he ever forget the face which she lifted to his as she went on slowly. "It would have saved much sorrow and sin and vain sacrifices if all you ought to have done had been done; but I must not judge you nor anyone else," she continued, "only I know how that the evil consequences of falsehood never end, and all atonement for sin is vain. Now, let us say no more, for there is only one thing to be done, and that is to send for Valentine Eyre's wife!"

"Yes," rejoined the doctor, "there is not a moment to be lost; but poor Celia has suffered all her life," he added, gently, "and you must not judge her harshly."

"Do you think I would dare to judge her at all?" murmured Blanche, with a heart-broken look. "I who have lived with remorse for twelve years! No; but I will go and pray with all my heart that he and she may be happy at last," and clasping her thin hands above her breast Blanche Hastings, now Sister Bertha for ever more, rose from her chair and glided from the room.

"I am an old man," murmured Dr. Maynard, as he gazed after her; "but I have never seen a nobler woman! She is of the stuff from which martyrs are made; but who'd have thought she suffered that saw her so calm and cold, as she always seemed? Truly," added the doctor in broken tones, "it is most often by the fierce, cruel fires which burn unseen in our own breasts that we are purified at last."

After which Dr. Maynard carried out his intention of telegraphing for Valentine Eyre's wife; but as he wrote the words of the message he had not a hope that Celia would see her husband alive.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ROMOLA had told the Marquis that she would always look on him as the truest friend and the noblest man she had ever met, and with the memory of these words ringing in his heart, he to whom they had been spoken seemed to lead a charmed life.

His love was hopeless, these very words, with all their kindness, told him so. The Marquis knew that the girl he would have died to win was as utterly lost to him as if she lay still and dead in deep earth, but yet he had never been so happy in all his life; never had the world seemed so fair to Egerton, Marquis of Eastshire, as in these days when he watched over Romola, and waited for the happiness which his heart told him must come to her.

"It will be my death," he said to himself a thousand times a day, "but what care I if my darling is blessed? I would rather suffer a century of anguish with the knowledge that she was happy than endure one moment of bliss which was purchased with the lightest pain for her," and then the Marquis would fling himself down in some solitary part of the park, and repeat aloud the sweet words which Romola had spoken to him, and kneeling there he would pray heaven to shower its richest blessings on the path of this young girl.

No day passed that Romola did not receive some proof or token of his tender care for her; but whether it was a gift of books, or flowers to cheer her, weariness or some attention so slight as to be noticed by none save her who was its object, all was done in so delicate a manner that both the gifts and the trifling little attentions were a source of unmingled pleasure to Romola, who rejoiced to think that the Marquis had quite got over his dream of love, and now felt no more than a painless and tender regard for herself and thinking thus, Romola was perfectly at ease in the company of this man who had sworn to insure her happiness at any cost.

She could lay her hand in his without shrinking, feeling that the strong tender clasp which he gave her was that of a brother, and she could look up and meet his eyes without a pang, telling him in her gentle tones that Juan could never do more for her than he had done.

"Juan cannot love you as I do," was the impassioned reply which had once broken from the Marquis's lips; but when he saw the sweet face whiten and quiver beneath his words, he reproached himself bitterly for his want of thought.

"Some brothers can love better than others," he added, with a grave, tender smile, "and I am older than Juan, which makes a difference," then he bent down and busied himself in arranging the books and flowers on Romola's table, so that they might be nearer to her hand, and the feeling of perfect trust in him, which crept into the young girl's heart in that moment, was never again broken by the Marquis.

Suffer what he would, happen what might, he was determined to earn the title which Romola had given him of truest friend, and day by day, as her faith and trust in him grew deeper and surer, he knew that not even for her love would he exchange what he had won.

Fortune seemed to be fighting for the Marquis in those days, for Zilella had over-eaten herself at a dinner-party to which she had been invited, and now she lay in bed, with two doctors and the greater part of the household in attendance on her, which happy state of affairs gave the Marquis permission to devote himself to Romola from morning till night.

But in spite of this privilege, which was a bliss he had never dared to hope for, the Marquis was not happy—not because he knew that while he sat beside her Romola's thoughts were far away from him, and the words which he read from some printed books, or uttered from his own heart, not because he knew that this pleasure, small as it was, must soon come to an end, and he must go away and perhaps be

quickly forgotten by her whose memory would remain with him to his life's end—and beyond it.

What was it, then, that weighed ceaselessly on the man's spirit, bringing a sense of depression and dread all the harder to be borne because it was a prevision of sorrow in the near future, which yet neither pointed to any dread object or took any real or tangible shape? Were he alone to suffer he would have faced his lot without fear, but it seemed to him that the danger threatened Romola, and more than ever did he seek to protect her from its menacing power.

A cloud was slowly rising between them and bearing the girl in some mysterious way far from his sight. Sometimes when he held her hand in his and heard her speak words of tender affection for himself, a blackness would suddenly pass before his eyes, and the sweet face and form would become but a dim shape to him, and the voice seemed like the fragment of some mournful sounds such as dwell among tombs; then the delusion would pass away once more, and when the Marquis came back to the sound of Romola's voice and saw the sunlight shining on her face he would persuade himself that his fears were groundless, and no more unhappiness was to be dreaded for her. But in the dead watches of the night his terrors would return and force him to do battle with them until in the agony of his heart he could have shrieked aloud; but soon the Marquis was to learn the meaning of the nervous terrors, and the melancholy of which he had become the almost ceaseless prey.

One morning the Marquis went down to breakfast, which he found he was to take in *à-la-tête* with Mrs. Alingham, who explained that the master of the house wished to have his meal served in a private room.

This was a great relief to the Marquis, who at all times found his host very tedious, but this morning he was feeling unusually wretched and depressed; he had endured a long, sleepless night, and the prevision of coming evil was stronger on him than ever, but he hoped that Mrs. Alingham would be too deeply absorbed in her own thoughts to bestow any notice on his white, worn face, and it seemed as if this was the case, for having greeted him in her usual manner Mrs. Alingham followed up her apology for the host's absence with some casual remarks which, as her companion very well knew, had no place in her thoughts.

So they sat down to the meal for which neither had any heart; but the Marquis did not succeed as well as usual in the concealment of his sufferings, and his hand shook so violently that when Mrs. Alingham handed him his coffee the cup fell to the table, causing the delicate china to be shattered in fragments.

An exclamation of annoyance broke from the lips of the Marquis, and he began hastily to apologise for his awkwardness, looking as he spoke with evident concern on the ruin of the snowy damask cloth.

"I am really ashamed of myself," he began, "I must have startled you so. I'm sure I can't tell how I managed it but—"

"I am afraid you are ill, Marquis," interrupted Mrs. Alingham, and then in grave, anxious tones she went on. "I had suspected that you were not yourself, but I have always gone back to my own thoughts and forgotten all about you; now I see plainly that you have been suffering all the time you were devoting yourself to poor Romola, and if you are going to be ill I shall never forgive myself for my indifference."

The Marquis interrupted in his turn,

begging that Mrs. Alingham would not distress herself on his account.

"Why should you worry about me?" he said, a little curtly. "I have not felt any inconvenience beyond a little difficulty in sleeping, and last night it was worse than usual, so that I am a little shaky, but I am not going to be ill if I can help it."

"I hope not," rejoined Mrs. Alingham, as she poured out another cup of coffee for her companion, and then she discreetly refrained from any further pursuit of the subject, but there was no need for words now to convince the Marquis that he was going to be very ill.

The knowledge had come to him in so simple and natural a manner that he only wondered he had not understood it from the first. He was going to be ill, that he knew at last was the meaning of the weight which had lain so heavily upon him, and the shadow which had come between him and Romola, and knowing this, he felt possessed with a joy so great that it was almost madness.

"The sorrow was for me and not for her," he thought, exultantly; and then feeling that he must be alone he muttered some excuse to Mrs. Alingham, and rising from his seat left the room.

As the Marquis passed through the hall he caught sight of his face in a mirror and the reflection startled him. It was wan beyond all description, and seemed shrunken to half its natural size, and there were deep furrows on his brow, and black rings round the sunken eyes.

Altogether it was a dispiriting sight, and as the Marquis lingered before the glass there crept into his mind an idea that he was looking on his face as others would soon see it in death.

"I am going to die!" he said to himself, as he passed out into the garden. "But, surely, before I go Heaven will give me some sign that my darling will be as happy as ever I could wish her to be, and then the sooner I die and am forgotten the better it will be."

"I wonder," the Marquis continued, after a moment's pause, "what form this illness of mine will take?" And then a sudden thought crossed his mind, and as his courage fled before it he shivered and struck his hands together, exclaiming aloud,—

"Good Heaven! I have forgotten the dog who bit me a few months ago; Of course, it is that which is beginning to affect me now, and I am a doomed man!" he went on slowly. "Doomed to a most horrible and painful death! But, so help me Heaven, for her sake I will meet my fate in silence, and she shall never know that I suffered or how I died for her, though she does not love me. But as a friend her gentle heart would ache whenever she recalled my memory."

The Marquis continued to walk up and down the garden for some time, and the sunshine was so bright, the flowers so fair that the ghastly fate which menaced him might well seem a delusion. But when he went indoors and stood before Romola one glance revealed to her that some terrible change had taken place in her friend.

"Oh! you are going to be very ill," she said, sorrowfully, and her face grew pale while her hand shook so that the letter which she had been reading dropped from it and fell to the floor.

"What matter if I am going to be ill?" rejoined the Marquis, who, for one moment, felt beside himself. "Even if I should die?" he added, bitterly, "who is there that would mourn me?"

"Oh, now you are unlike yourself," replied Romola, and tears filled her eyes.

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"You are unkind," she went on, reproachfully. "Do you think that I am so heartless that I could bear to lose you without bitter pain?"

"You are an angel!" cried the Marquis; and then in an outbreak of emotion he flung himself down on the ground by her couch, and taking her little hand in his pressed it to his lips. "You are an angel," he repeated, "to be so sweet and kind to me when I worked so much evil in your life! I parted you from your lover," he went on, "and now when I would atone to you by making your life bright once more I seem to hover about you like a bird of ill omen. I saw you as I came in just now looking hopeful and happy. You were reading a letter, and your eyes were full of tender light, but the instant you became aware of my presence they were clouded with sorrow and pain."

"Because I was sorry to see you looking so ill," replied Romola, tenderly. "But for the future I will hide my feelings if they hurt you so much."

Again the Marquis caught the little hand and pressed it to his lips.

"You cannot understand me," he said, passionately. "Your pity is both life and death to me. I would have it and I would not, for I would rather you were utterly indifferent to my fate than feel one pang on my account."

"You wrong me when you say that," replied Romola, gently, "for my heart must be dead to every feeling of joy or sorrow when it becomes callous to your fate. I have told you before," she added, earnestly, "that I think you the noblest man that ever lived."

"You do not know me," rejoined the Marquis, "but I must not allow you to think better of me than I deserve. You have no idea what a struggle it costs me to do right, and you would hardly believe me, Romola, were I to tell you that it was with jealous anger I saw you looking so happy over that letter as I came in just now."

"Ah! you would look happy too," rejoined Romola, "did you know how highly that letter spoke of you."

"Of me!" exclaimed the Marquis in unfeigned amazement.

"Yes, it is from Ethel Drood. I always thought her a woman whom it could be no wrong to dislike and mistrust, but now she has proved herself most noble and self-sacrificing, for she has confessed in this letter how it was that Churchill was led to doubt my truth, and now I can forgive him freely, for I see that he was not to blame, and he must have suffered agonies in the belief that his love had all been wasted on a girl who had proved herself utterly false and despicable, who could expect that having overheard all he did he would endure the pain of any further explanation; and I can forgive Ethel also," added Romola, softly; "because she has suffered and repented sincerely; but I almost wish I could give you her letter to read, for she says it was you who, by your work and actions, first opened her eyes to the horror of deceit and selfishness, and stirred in her heart a wish to be good and true for goodness sake."

The Marquis did not speak for a few moments, and as his head was bent so that she could not see his face, Romola began to fear that her words had wounded him, but at length the Marquis spoke, and set her doubts at rest.

"Child," he said gravely, and tenderly, "you are too kind to me, but I can only say Heaven bless you, for what Miss Drood says I did for her you have done for me."

And in all reverence the Marquis sealed these words with a touch of his lips on Romola's little hand, but the pledge had

scarcely been given before a curtain at the further end of the room was torn violently apart, and white with fury Zitella appeared in the aperture.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE Marquis sprang to his feet, and placed himself in a defensive attitude between Romola and the angry woman, for from the unmistakable condition of the latter he dreaded a scene of some disgraceful kind.

It was yet early in the day, in fact it wanted an hour to noon, but already Zitella had been indulging in the fatal habit which had become second nature to her, and as he looked at her crimson face and flaming eyes, the Marquis felt his soul turn sick within him for pity and disgust. But the former feeling soon changed to anger as he thought of Romola exposed to the insults and contumely which, despite his presence, this coarse violent woman would be sure to heap upon her.

He would fain have spared Romola the sight which, strong man as he was, sickened and revolted him, but this was impossible, for unsteady as her gait was, Zitella had crossed the room like a flash of thought, and pushing aside with all the violence of which she was capable, she stood in his place glaring down on the poor child, who shrank in trembling horror from a sight which, until this moment had had no place in her imagination.

For some moments Zitella contented herself with glaring, but meanwhile she was gathering all her energies for the first outburst of the storm, which, when it began exceeded the Marquis's worst fears.

In the coarsest and most brutal terms she poured into Romola's terrified ears the story of her birth, which had been concocted by Hermann Eyre, heaping on her the vilest epithets which her tongue could frame. Zitella gave Romola to understand that her proper place and her mother's place was among the offcasts of society, among the degraded and wretched, and not here in the house, where the very lowest menial would shrink from her contaminating presence were all made publicly known, as it ought to be.

It was in vain that the Marquis tried to stem the fierce torrent of the woman's fury. He might as well have tried to stay the descent of a mountain cataract, and though Zitella's voice was thick with wine, he could not hope that her speech was unintelligible, for he saw Romola writhe beneath every word as beneath a lash; and more than once he tried to divert the woman's fury to himself; but this was equally vain. Zitella was wild with fury because her smouldering suspicions and jealousies had all been aroused and confirmed by the scene which she had witnessed through the curtain, and even her dulled mind told her that she could best punish the Marquis by insulting the girl for whom, as she said, the Marquis had dared to desert her.

So Romola was made the victim of this woman's fierce, merciless hatred, and as the cruel tongue lashed her with insults of the most degrading kind, the poor child closed her eyes wondering wildly why Heaven did not send some one to rescue her from this woman, whose hot vinous breath seemed to scorch her cheek, whose infamous words sunk each like a deadly plague-spot in her heart. It seemed strange to her that a man should stand there and allow her to be reviled and insulted in this manner; but even as her mind framed this thought, Zitella's tongue grew still from sheer exhaustion, and the Marquis immediately took advantage of her silence to reprove her unwomanly conduct in stern

tones; but this interference had only the evil effect of causing a fresh outbreak of fury on the part of the woman whose brain was now almost maddened by the unrestrained exercise of her own bad passions.

"You dare to call me bad, shameless!" shrieked Zitella, striking at the Marquis in her frenzy. "How dare you—how dare you? It is you who deserve these names—you who made me your wife long ago, and then left me, not caring what my future fate might be!"

"Zitella," gasped the Marquis, in harsh, dry tones, for there was enough truth in the woman's words to make him shrink and recoil as from a lash. "Zitella, for Heaven's sake!"

He cast an anxious glance towards the cowering trembling form on the couch, and at once the full tide of the virago's fury was turned on Romola.

"No, not for Heaven's sake or for yours," she shrieked, "will I spare her! Scorpion! Serpent that she is! This is my reward for giving her a shelter in my house; but she shall go out this instant. I tell you she shall be dragged forth and shamed before everyone!"

Here Zitella made a gesture as if to drag the now almost unconscious girl from the sofa; but apparently her hatred and frenzy had overreached itself, for as her arms were extended to seize their prey the cruel desire of her heart was frustrated. She reeled and staggered for an instant and then fell heavily to the ground, on which, with her face downwards, she lay as one dead.

The Marquis looked down for one moment at the prostrate, swollen form, and the shudder which passed over him at the sight was simply relief mingled with the strongest disgust for such a spectacle of depraved womanhood as had never before come within the range of his vision. He must have felt pity and deepest compassion but for the thought of the innocent, hapless victim of this woman's fury lying now too crushed and broken for the feeblest cry; and as the infamous words which Zitella had spoken flashed back with cruel distinctness on his memory, he almost framed the wish that she might never breathe again.

But she must be removed. So the Marquis rang the bell, and when a servant appeared, he said, coldly,—

"Your mistress has a fit or swoon of some kind. See that she is carried to her room at once and a doctor sent for."

And having given his orders the Marquis turned once more to Romola, but not before he had seen the look of contempt and aversion which the servant had cast on his unconscious mistress.

Romola's face was white, and her eyes were closed as if all sense and feeling had left her. She did not speak or move when the Marquis raised her tenderly in his arms and bore her into another room, as far as possible from the hateful presence of Zitella. He hoped that she was quite unconscious, but as he laid her down on a sofa she opened her eyes and looked at him in a way which haunted him to the very last hour of his life.

"Tell me," she said, clasping her hand, "tell me, truly, is it true what that woman said?"

"Some of it is true," replied the Marquis, desperately, feeling that he could not lie or prevaricate while those clear eyes were fixed on his face.

"How much of it is true?" was Romola's next question.

The Marquis hung his head like a guilty child. He felt choking with shame and misery, his heart was contracted, his face burning. He wished now that he had denied

it all emphatically as a pure invention of Zitella's fiendish malice. She might never appear to contradict him; but it was not yet too late to repair his error, and as a thought came to him like an inspiration, he looked up and answered Romola's question.

"The charge which she brought against me is true," he said, slowly. "I behaved like a villain to Zitella once, and the fact that she proved herself more than a match for me does not make my guilt less; but the worst part of my punishment is that my sin has been visited on you, for Zitella looks on you as her rival in my affections, forgetting that she and I parted by mutual consent when you were but a mere baby, and before ever I had seen your face; but I should at least have taken care to protect you from the coarse insults which have been heaped upon you, for I might have known that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned!"

"You could not have spared me," replied Romola; then in a strange tone she added, slowly, "besides, if what she said was true, why should you?"

"You mean that I am unworthy to be your champion," said the Marquis, recoiling as from a blow.

"No," rejoined the girl in sad, steadfast tones, then, from a moment's faltering, she went on bravely, "but however angry she may have been, she would not have thought of such things without some foundation, and if I am what she called me—"

The Marquis interrupted her, almost angrily.

"She was mad," he cried, "mad with jealous fury and drink! You could see, you must have seen, that the wretched woman was not in her right mind! There was no truth in anything she said but what I have already spoken of. You will promise to forget her words, Romola, and try and forgive me?"

"Why should you ask that?" said the girl, sadly, "there is nothing to forgive. If you were sinful in the past I must be sorry for your own sake; but you have done me no wrong!"

"I would rather die than hear you say anything else!" was the man's impassioned cry.

"You never will!" rejoined Romola, earnestly. "You have been my best, truest friend, and whatever your past may have been, I believe that you have atoned for it, and I can never think of you as anything but noble and good! But now," she added, gently, "I am stunned and shocked, and as I have much to think of, I should like to be left alone for a little while."

"I will leave you, Romola," said the Marquis; "but you must promise me that you will do nothing rash?"

The girl only smiled, but the Marquis was reassured, for, faint as her smile was, he took it as an acknowledgment of her helplessness; but when he would have left her, the white, silent pain in her face went like a knife to his heart, and he exclaimed, with a frown access of bitterness against Zitella,—

"You will believe that there was no truth in that woman's words? But the roof which shelters such a vile creature is no fit home for you, and I shall urge Valentine Eyre to make immediate arrangements for your return to Lockesly Hall."

"You are very good!" murmured Romola; "but it is not likely that one so despised as I am will be considered. And why should you trouble yourself on my account?"

She closed her eyes as she spoke, as if not wishing or expecting an answer, and the Marquis made none in words; but before he left her he stooped and pressed a long, ten-

der kiss on the pale brow, and that was his last farewell of the girl for whom he would have gladly laid down the life which, until he knew her, had never brought him one real joy.

Having given her that kiss the Marquis left Romola, little dreaming that on this side of the grave they would never meet again.

He went away to his own room, and there, with solitude, the nervous terrors which had been banished during the violent altercation with Zitella returned in stronger force than ever.

A violent shivering seized him in every limb, and for the first time he felt an almost unconquerable dread of the doom which seemed to threaten him.

"It must be death which menaces me!" he gasped, as he paced the length of the apartment, and a cold sweat broke out on his brow as the grim enemy seemed to steal nearer upon him. "It must be death!" he repeated, almost faint with growing horror. "And if it is from the cause I fear, what a terrible fate is mine! But why should I die? I am still young, I am rich, honoured, and in the grave Romola will be less mine than she is now! Why should I leave her and this fair world to lie in darkness and be forgotten?"

His voice broke suddenly, and as if exhausted through the fierce struggle with his fears, he sank down in a chair, and covered up his face in his cold, trembling hands; but by degrees he grew calmer, for his mind had once more gone back to Romola, and thoughts came whose very bitterness gave him strength.

"After all," he said, "how could life without her love be worth living? And now that she knows the worst that can be told of me, how can I hope that her friendship for me will last? But I am so little to her that my loss can give her no pain, only she will think of me all the more kindly, especially," and he smiled sadly, "when the man she loves will benefit by my death, for Churchill Penance must be Marquis of Eastshire when I am gone!"

Suddenly the Marquis paused in these half-uttered musings, and his hand tightened convulsively on the back of his chair. A horrible thought had come to him.

Suppose that Churchill Penance should, after all, be unworthy of Romola? Suppose, on hearing the story of her birth, he should consider her unfit to be his wife?

It was a horrible idea, and the Marquis strove against it, feeling and hoping that it could be nothing less than an insult to one who was nobler than he had ever been. But still he had no guarantee for his kinsman's honour except this—which should have been all-convincing—that he loved Romola; and, remembering that men had broken sacred vows before now, the Marquis determined to provide against all contingencies.

Churchill Penance should be Marquis of Eastshire, that he could not alter, nor did he desire to, but Romola should be his heiress; all his private fortune, which was considerable, and several unentailed estates in his possession, should pass to this young girl, and he would word his will so that whether she married or remained single all that he left her would be absolutely and solely her own for ever.

But still the Marquis's heart was heavy, for though he could by this means secure riches and worldly honour to Romola, the poor child's happiness was still unassured, and he would then have given worlds for some pledge of Churchill's good faith.

But I can at last make her rich," said the Marquis; and as to think with him was to act, he determined to see his lawyer without delay.

A telegram would have summoned the man of business to his side in a few hours, but the Marquis preferred going himself to London; for, besides the desire to exert himself for Romola's sake, he felt that some course of action could alone shake off the nervous terror and the fearful depression which possessed him.

He went downstairs, and, in consequence of Zitella's sudden illness, found the house all in confusion.

Mrs. Alingham was nowhere to be seen, and the servant whom he had sent to make inquiries for Romola returned to say that Miss De Nunz—for so Romola was still called—was not as well as usual. She had gone to lie down in her own room, and would prefer not to be disturbed.

The Marquis had no intention of disturbing her, but he sent back the servant with a kind, tender, little note, which he fondly hoped might soothe and cheer the poor child, but did not mention his intended journey, even in the most casual way, for he thought that in all probability he would be back at Chevenage Court that night, or at the very latest on the following morning.

And having written and despatched his note by the hands of the servant, the Marquis set out from Chevenage Court, but as he passed through the park gates there crept over him a feeling too sad and strange for words.

It was hardly tangible, but for one moment he had almost turned back, so strong was the fear that he would never see Romola again.

The Marquis arrived in London, and, though he had been out of England for so many years, he felt at once that, as far as he was concerned, the Great Babylon was empty.

As soon as his business with the lawyer was over, he felt that there were still many hours of the afternoon to be got through.

He turned into St. James's, but it was a howling wilderness, for there was not one familiar face to greet him. But the feeling that he was going to be ill made him decide that he would endure the solitude of London rather than return to Chevenage Court.

He left St. James's and went through Piccadilly, and those who passed by might have noticed that he lingered for many minutes outside the door of a chemist's shop.

His face was so white that more than one person stared at him, and a policeman moved forward as if to ask if he were ill.

A temptation to end his life had suddenly seized on the unhappy man. It had sprung into his mind at the sight of the chemist's shop, and he lingered before the door, saying to himself,—

"What could be easier than go in and purchase some drug with power to send me painlessly to another world?"

But at length there came a thought of Romola, and he was saved. He triumphed over the temptation and passed on, saying that for her sake he would at least die worthy of the name she had given him because she had said he was noble. He would do nothing for which men might justly call him a coward when he was gone.

He went to one of his old clubs, and a waiter came to him asking if he would have some dinner. He wanted no food, but for form's sake he ordered something, for he could at least make a pretence of eating to while away the time, but before the meal was ready all thought of this was over.

The Marquis knew that the dreaded moment was come upon him. His throat was dry and burning, and he could have cried aloud for nervous terror. He felt a most intolerable thirst, but when they brought

him something to drink he turned away from it in a frenzy. This caused such alarm that a doctor was immediately sent for, and soon the horrible truth became known that the Marquis was dying of hydrophobia.

He had established no settled home on his return to England, and, as most of his relations were utterly estranged or dead, the people at the club knew not whom to summon to the death-bed of the Marquis; but a hasty message found the lawyers, who assured them that the Marquis must have had some fore-knowledge of his fate, for only a few hours ago he had set his affairs in order.

He (the lawyer) suggested that a message should be sent to Chevenage Court apprising the family there of the Marquis's condition. But though this advice was promptly acted upon it proved of no avail, for the end was so mercifully near the beginning of his illness that in less than three hours the Marquis's violent struggles and cries of agony ended in the perfect peace and silence of death.

His trouble was all over when the telegram announcing his illness reached Chevenage Court.

Through the carelessness of a boy who had been entrusted to deliver it the telegram did not reach its destination until the following morning, and then it fell into the hands of Mrs. Alingham, who could not at first understand its meaning.

Absorbed in her own sorrows and heart-struggles, Celia had been utterly indifferent to what went on around her, and until this moment she had not the faintest idea that the Marquis had left Chevenage Court, where all was still in confusion on account of Zitella's illness.

Now, having read the telegram, Mrs. Alingham, or rather Celia, rang the bell, and when a servant appeared she asked him if the Marquis had not dined as usual on the previous evening.

"No, madam," replied the servant. "I don't think there was any dinner taken last night. It seemed as if everybody was absent. The master would not leave the mistress's sick-room, and Jane came down at the last moment to say that neither you nor your young lady would dine."

"That is true," rejoined Celia. "Miss De Nunaz was too ill and I too tired to come downstairs. But about the Marquis?" she added, hastily. "It is very strange, I have just had a telegram to say that he is dangerously ill in London, and I did not even know that he had left Chevenage. Still, I think and hope there is some mistake."

"There may be, madam," said the servant, respectfully, "but it has been remarked by us all for the last week that the Marquis looked very ill and unlike himself. I fancy, too, that he gave James a note for Miss De Nunaz yesterday, and went away at once. Perhaps it was on account of Mrs. Eyre's illness; however, I will, if you wish, go and make enquiries."

"Thank you, John," replied Celia, "but I think I will go myself to Miss De Nunaz, for if another went she might be alarmed."

And as Celia spoke she was moving towards the door, but the entrance of Romola's maid caused her to stand still once more, looking in growing wonder and terror at the girl who also stood still and silent, with a face so white and seared that anyone might think she had received some deadly shock.

"Speak, Rachel!" cried Celia, at last, unable to bear the suspense any longer. "Speak!" she repeated, almost angrily, in the anguish and terror of her heart; "do

not stand there looking as if you had lost your voice, but tell me at once what dreadful thing has happened!"

"Oh, madam!" gasped the maid, "I fear it is something dreadful. I do not like to pain you, but I cannot find Miss Romola anywhere, and it seems to me that she has gone away altogether."

Mrs. Alingham drew a long, hard breath. This news was for the moment a most intense relief by contrast with what she had expected, for with the first appearance of the maid, though she would not own it to herself, there had rushed into her mind an agonised fear that Romola was dead.

Now her first and most natural thought was that this was altogether a false alarm. The maid had found her young lady's room unoccupied, and had immediately rushed to some wild conclusion; but still Celia was anxious and apprehensive.

Why should the child, especially in her weak state, be out of her room at that early hour?

"The bed has not been slept in, madam," went on the maid; "and there's a little note fastened to the pin-cushion, which I didn't dare to touch."

"There is some mistake, Rachel," said poor Celia, in a broken tone; "let us go at once and look for her, and we will find that she has only slipped into another room." And so hiding her terrible fears under this hopeful manner, Celia went away to her daughter's room.

She found it as the maid had said—deserted. The bed had not been slept in, and there was the note on the pin-cushion, addressed to "Mrs. Alingham."

With a trembling hand Celia opened it, and found that Rachel's surmise was true.

Incredible it seemed to Celia, who knew how weak and ill the poor child had been, but, nevertheless, it was true that Romola had left her home, as she said in her letter, for ever.

Celia, heart-sickened, then burned with anger against her husband, and hatred and loathing of herself as she read the explanation of this sudden flight. But at length the paper dropped from her hand, while her heart cried out that if her child died, she would have killed her.

The maid was sobbing behind her, but Celia's misery was too deep for tears. She turned her blanched face to the wall and thought despairingly of what she had allowed to come upon her child.

Romola had been insulted and reviled, foul infamy and undeserved shame had been heaped upon her.

It had been shame enough to quarter her beneath the same roof with such a creature as Zitella. But Romola, her pure and innocent child, had been driven from her rightful home—the home in which, but for her mother, the girl would have been cherished to-day as idol and queen.

And she, the mother, who loved her, had done it all. For her own selfish pride first, and then for the husband who had never loved or been true to her, Celia had sacrificed her child awretchedly and wantonly—she told herself now—as if she had slain her before the altar of some heathen god.

Until this moment Celia, through all the trials of her life, had been upheld by the belief that she was acting the part of a noble, self-sacrificing woman, but Romola's loss tore the veil from her eyes, and she saw what her conduct had really been—renunciation perhaps in later years, but rooted—always rooted in selfishness and the pride that could not brook to play the part of the patient, unloved wife.

Stripped of the garb in which her girlish sentimentalism and false notion of right had been draped, she looked back and saw her

deceit towards her husband as a sin for which no punishment could be too bitter, for which nothing could atone. She alone was to blame from first to last. She had driven her husband from her side and now must answer for the sins to which she had tempted him.

Again this new vision involved Celia in fresh difficulties, for in proportion to the harshness of her judgment of herself, her heart had softened towards her husband until she had forgiven everything, and was ready to find an excuse for his heartless denunciation of his own children.

"That wicked woman bewitched him," said Celia, sadly, "but now, when he hears how she has treated his own child, her evil influence will be less, and if any natural feelings remain to him, he must be won by my appeal." And so, in remorse and bitterness, Celia went down to meet the man whom she believed to be her husband.

The fact that he received her with an evil scowl and mutterings that sounded like an imprecation did not harden her heart against him.

She found him in the library in his dressing-gown over a fire which had been heaped up in the grate, though the weather was almost sultry.

He looked ill and wretched, but the knowledge that he was suffering on account of the degraded woman upstairs did not cause Celia to feel any resentment.

She was all tenderness and kindness to him until he received the news of Romola's flight with the indifferent remark that he supposed she would soon come to her senses, but that Chevenage Court was no place for her, and under the circumstances it was just as well she should have taken the initiative.

"My wife is mistress here," he said, coarsely, "and her will must be law. Those who won't be civil to her have only one thing to do, and that is pack. And if this young jade hadn't gone of her own accord I'd have sent away, even if she were my own daughter, which I thank Heaven she is not."

Then it was that, once for all, the mother in Celia asserted itself. Everything was swept away before her, and only thinking of her child, only seeing the man before her as the robber and despoiler of her children, she suddenly fell upon flashing forth all the pent-up feelings of her heart in a blaze of passion that fairly paralysed him for a few moments.

"How dare you?" she cried, in quivering tones. "Coward! robber! that you are! How dare you deny before Heaven the children that are lawfully yours? How dare you take their birthright and their name from them? Speak, Valentine Eyre, and answer me this. No," with a sudden, sweeping gesture of her arm, "I know all your villainous design, and I will tell you why you have denied your children. It is because you would enrich the wretched creature you call wife with the fortune of Celia De Nunaz, the wife you never loved. And so you dare to thank Heaven that Romola is not your daughter? Well, I would to Heaven that she were not, for her father is her only shame!"

She paused at last, as if exhausted by the force of her own passion, and Hermann looked at her for the space of a few moments in dazed, wondering silence. It was as if there was some power in her rigid attitude which held him spell-bound, but when he saw her tremble at last he began to feel once more that his antagonist was but a weak woman, and he burst into a coarse laugh.

"Very fine, indeed!" he exclaimed, with an air of mock approval. "You have the

fire and passion of a true Spaniard; but I should like to know the meaning of it all. Upon my word, madam, I should like to know by what right you make me the object of this tirade? Is it because you have been paid to care for and educate the base-born children of a base-born and base-living brother that you think yourself at liberty to insult and threaten me?"

"No," replied Celia, flashing on him a look of scorn. "It is because I know that these children are yours, and I dare you to deny it again!"

"You are mad," cried Hermann; "but there," pointing to the door, "leave the room, woman, I have had quite enough of you. Leave the room this instant!" he repeated, savagely, "and the house too; and I swear that, for this insolence, neither you nor that boy or girl will ever come under this roof again!"

"You order me out of your house?" returned Celia, facing round on him with a face as white as a sheet; "but I swear to Heaven," she added, solemnly, "that I will not stir one foot until you have acknowledged that this boy and girl, as you call them, are the children of you and your lawful wife Celia De Nunaz."

Hermann heard her with an oath in Spanish, and a gesture as if he would strike her aside, but her fearless glance seemed to restrain him, and dropping his arm as he raised it, he said, scornfully,—

"Let my lawful wife Celia De Nunaz, as you call her, come back from the grave, and prove that the children are mine, then I will acknowledge them."

"You will?" cried Celia, in piercing tone, "so be it then," and then with a rapid movement of her hands she tore from her head the widow's cap and the white wig which had disguised her, revealing her own luxuriant dark tresses, only faintly touched with grey. She had plucked the spectacles from her eyes, and removed the false brows, and there, at last, she stood, half-triumphant, half-pleading, and far more beautiful than the Celia of seventeen years ago; but to her surprise no gleam of recognition appeared on the face of the man before her.

He looked at her in silent, half-interested wonder for a few moments, and then he broke forth in Spanish with a string of oaths,—

"Who in the devil's name are you?" he exclaimed, at last. And, with a scornful smile, Celia replied,—

"You are worse even than I thought, for you cannot have forgotten me; but I will tell you my name. I am Celia Eyre, the mother of your children and your lawful wife!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

FOR the space of several moments the two stood looking at one another—Celia firm, denouncing Hermann, white as ashes, cowering with guilty terror, and quivering in every limb.

He had been a daring villain and a clever one, but this was a contingency for which he was wholly unprepared, for never in his wildest moments would he have dreamed that Valentine Eyre's wife was not really dead.

It was so strange and unexpected a *dénouement* that he had no power to think or act, nor did it occur to him to doubt the truth of the words which he had just heard. He had thought of but one thing in those moments, and that was the certain discovery of his fraud, the failure of his daring scheme; and but for Celia he would, in the confusion of his senses, have thrown himself upon the mercy of Valentine Eyre's true wife, and made a full confession of his crimes.

But Celia was a true woman, and as she looked at the white, trembling man before her, all her anger and disgust at his treachery was swallowed up in a swift, rising flood of remorse and pity for him.

His guilty terror was but shocked surprise in her eyes, and her tenderness made her quick to realise the painfulness of the position in which her husband had been placed by the sudden reappearance of a wife whom he had been led to suppose was dead.

"He is suffering for Zitella," was Celia's first and most natural thought, and, strange to say, it gave rise to no pang of jealous anger. Her remorse and magnanimity were so great that she only felt pity for the woman whom she had unintentionally wronged, and grieving for her husband. She was ready to acknowledge that, whatever her character might be, Zitella was more worthy of Valentine Eyre's love than she (Celia) had ever been.

"How can I believe him?" she said to herself, until she lost sight of the crime which he would have committed, and the blackness of the character in which he had revealed himself to her. She forgot that he might be troubled for the future of his schemes, forgot her children. She only remembered that this man was her husband, and she had driven him to sin. Then as a great wave of anger against herself and sorrow for him swept over her soul, she went down before him, crying out all her tenderness at his feet.

"Oh, Valentine, my husband, forgive me!" she cried, brokenly. "I do not blame you; it was all my fault. I was proud and foolish. I thought that you were not to be won, and I could not bear the thought of being an unloved wife. So I left you to believe that I was dead, and my servants were well paid to deceive you; but I swear now before Heaven that in no other way was I ever false to you. I never saw your brother Hermann, never heard of him, and that confession which he left behind him was utterly false. In all but this one act I have ever been your true wife."

She paused a moment, but did not look up, and, seeing her weakness, Hermann began to breathe freely. In a moment he saw that his place was sure as ever, and his plans were formed. This woman was Valentine's real wife, but he no longer feared her. She was bowed down with remorse for her error. That he could see plainly, and he would trade upon it, and on her love for her husband, which no coldness or neglect had been able to kill. She was ready to magnify her mistake into a crime, and he would help her in this.

"You call yourself my true wife, Celia," he said, "but did you not forfeit all claim to that title when you deceived me and left my house without my permission? You had no provocation for such a step, and that you took it only proves to me that you were guilty of crimes for which the law would have enabled me to divorce you from myself for ever. But I should think," he added, hurriedly, "that the proofs which I had then of your falsehood would hold good to-day."

"You had no proofs," cried Celia, stung into fresh anger, "but that one which my senseless folly gave you. I speak," she added, "of that letter which I purposely allowed you to find in the leaves of a book, and which was written to a lover who never had any existence, in an insane desire to prove to you that I was not worth the grief which you felt because you could not love me."

"That was the action of a true wife," sneered Hermann; "but I am glad you reminded me of the letter. It will be another proof of the happiness I enjoyed with my first wife."

"You have that letter still?" gasped poor Celia, who began to feel that this man whom she had once wronged would be an implacable foe, and she could not say, "What have I done that I should be hunted down."

"Do you think that I would have destroyed so touching a proof of my wife's love?" returned Hermann; and then feeling perfectly sure that the game was all in his hands, he went on piteously. "You wonder why I did not seek to punish you when I read that letter long ago, Celia? Well, it was because I loved you then, and I had some scruple about bringing you to public shame when I thought of your father, and remembered his pride, and how he had loved you (those details had been gathered by Hermann in one of his visits to the estate of Valentine's father-in-law). But since then, Celia," he continued, "I have a woman fairer and more loving than you, and, after all that has passed, you cannot, even if you had a legal claim on me, expect that I will displace her and take you back to my heart?"

"I do not expect it," replied Celia, "I do not wish it. I acted wrongly, and whatever my future fate may be I do not mean to complain. Zitella, no matter what her faults may be, is more worthy of your love than I am, and I do not grudge her the place which I have forfeited; but my children," added Celia, with a swelling heart, "my beautiful innocents, they must not be wronged; and though I am ready to forgive you now for the temptation to set them aside when you thought that there was none to fight for them, I will not leave you until you have given me some sacred pledge that they shall never run the same risk again. You understand," she added, rising suddenly to her feet, and speaking with firmness and dignity. "I ask nothing from you for myself, but for them I must have justice, and rather than have them wronged in anything I will fight against you to the death!"

"You will fight against me to the death?" repeated Hermann, slowly, and looking much more confident. "Well, be it so, Celia; but what about your lover's guilty confession?" he asked with a dubious smile.

"I know nothing of it!" cried Celia, scornfully. "I never heard of your brother Hermann until you told me of him yourself; and it is my belief that he had no existence, and that you forged the confession on which you based your schemes for the robbery of my children."

Hermann was taken aback by the sudden change in the manner of this woman who, a moment ago, had been suppliant; but still hoping to triumph, he said, with an evil smile,—

"My brother Hermann had as much of an existence as that lover to whom you own to have written, and it is very likely that when your letter and the confession are produced side by side some connection will be found between the two."

For a moment Celia recoiled in terror and dismay. At last she had fathomed this man's heart to its deepest depths, and the unalterable conviction that he was hopelessly bad at last possessed her; but she had loved him.

She had hoped, even at the worst, for some gleam of a better nature, and the knowledge that she must arm herself against him as one utterly callous and cruel was so bitter that she felt stunned and helpless for very excess of grief.

And so she stood silent while Hermann exulted in the triumph which he now felt was his, for in his exultation he mistook Celia's attitude for one of surrender.

He thought himself clever to have used

against her the letter to which she had inadvertently alluded, and almost laughed aloud at her credulity; then, with all the cruelty of which he was capable, he began to devise a means for her final overthrow.

"Of course," he said, with a sneer, "you have plenty of proof to bring forward on behalf of your children?"

"Substantial proofs," replied Celia, beginning slowly to recover herself, and to harden to the combat. "There are those living," and she thought of Dr. Maynard, "who will bear good witness for me."

"Then you are determined to fight?" asked Hermann.

Celia looked at him in silence, and for one wild moment hope returned to her breast and kindled a glimmer of her old faith in him. Perhaps he was not so abandoned after all, but she would make one last appeal to his conscience.

"I do not want to fight," she said, gently, but firmly. "I only want right for my children. Promise to acknowledge them as yours, and I will go away in peace."

"Curse you!" exclaimed Hermann, in sudden, savage fury. "Why should I make terms with you? The children are not mine, and I refuse to acknowledge them, so fight as much and hard as you like. But one thing I tell you, and you he laughed bitterly, "you will not win."

"I shall win," returned Celia, steadfastly. "I have no fear, for Heaven is mightier than man."

Then, without another word or look at the man who had scorned and defied her without pity, she turned and crossed the room towards the door; but ere she could reach it the handle was turned on the outside, and a servant appeared in the opening with a telegram between his hands.

"For Mrs. Alingham," began the man. Then, seeing the strange lady, as Celia appeared to him, he drew back with a muttered apology, and hastily left the room. But his surprise was great when Celia followed him into the hall.

"For me, John?" she said, quietly, and before the astonished servant could frame a single syllable she had taken the telegram and opened it, to look the next moment as if a dagger had pierced her heart. She recovered, however; and, though white and trembling, read through the message which had come, carefully worded by Churchill Penance, but still plainly to be understood.

"Valentine Eyre has been foully dealt with; but though his life is despaired of, we may save him yet. If you are his wife, as Dr. Maynard says you are, your place is by his side. Be cautious, and lose no time in coming."

Twice Celia read this message, but though John watched her face curiously he could make nothing out of it, and when he gained courage to ask respectfully if the news concerned either Miss Romola or the Marquis, Celia only shook her head. Then, crushing the telegram up in her hand, she slowly returned to the room which she had just quitted, and found her late adversary occupying the same position in which she had left him.

His face was towards the door, and as she entered, looking white and agitated, he greeted her with a malignant smile, for again he was mistaken, feeling sure she had relented of her scorn and was come to surrender; and in the height of his triumph he never noticed that there was an altogether new and strange expression in the eyes which now met his.

"Well," he said, at last, seeing that she did not speak. "You have come back to tell me that you won't fight, after all?"

"I have not come to tell you anything of the sort," replied Celia, with a spirit which must have convinced Hermann that she might not be so easily crushed, after all. Then she paused, for there was much to consider.

Should she tell him now that his case was lost? She was half-tempted to do so, for the longing to unmask him was almost irresistible. He had sold her so completely that nothing could describe her disgust and anger against him when she recalled the struggles through which she had gone on his account, and, above all, this last scene through which they had just passed, in which she had prostrated herself at the feet of this most villainous impostor, laying bare to him the most sacred feelings of her heart.

"The villain," she said to herself, and her hatred waxed stronger against him, "Why should he be allowed to go on exulting in his wickedness any longer?"

but then she remembered that she was but a weak woman pitted against a strong, unscrupulous man; and were she to denounce him now, he must, by some foul means, succeed in doing her some evil, so that she could not reach her husband's side.

She felt that he was capable of crimes beyond the possibility of her imagination, and so, determining to defer her triumph until she could make it complete, she repented calmly the words she had uttered a moment before.

"I have come to tell you nothing of the sort," she said, in clear tones, "but just to say this, that I am going to leave Chevenage Court now, and when I return to it, as I will do before long, you shall beg to me for mercy."

Then holding her head high with a pride and power which she had not displayed for long years Celia Eyre left the room, and, seeking her own, began to make hasty preparations for her journey to Spain; but after much thought upon the matter she resolved that as Mrs. Alingham she would return to her husband, and Mrs. Alingham she would remain until she had assured herself that in Valentine Eyre's heart there still burned, however dimly, some gleam of tenderness or kindly feeling towards the wife of his youth.

With this assurance she did not care how deeply she humiliated herself before him. So resuming her old disguise, which was clever enough to baffle the keenest eye, Celia set forth from Chevenage Court, leaving Hermann to scoff at her threat as the mere idle breath of an angry and helpless woman.

CHAPTER XXVII.

As soon as a favourable turn had enabled him to bear the change, Valentine Eyre had been removed to a country house in the neighbourhood of Rio San Vopez; and when Celia arrived at this place she found to her unspeakable joy, that the recovery of her husband's bodily health was no longer uncertain, for the clear mountain air in which he was now located had, in a very short space of time, effected what the doctors declared was nothing short of a miracle.

Of the restoration of his mind the hope was not so great, for he had been twelve years imprisoned in a dungeon devoid of all light and air, any human intercourse, and this had left an effect which was not easily combated; but the only wonder was, the doctors said, that the unfortunate man had escaped with his life.

Blanche Hastings had been Valentine's faithful nurse all through the weeks of his illness, and when Celia arrived she was with him still. The two women met and clasped hands in silence. Each seemed to read at a glance the history of the other's

life. Each felt that the other had been through the fire of pain, and been ennobled and purified, and that in the greatest sorrow of human kind they were sisters, but though all was understood, not a word was uttered on either side. Celia was the first to speak, but her words could only faintly express the boundless gratitude of her heart.

"How can I thank you?" was all she said, "To your tender nursing, the doctors tell me, my husband owes his life!"

"I have only done my duty," replied Blanche, calmly. "My life is spent in nursing the sick and caring for the poor."

"How noble you are!" cried Celia, warmly. And then, with tears in her eyes, she repeated again the assurance that she could never thank her friend for the service which she had rendered her.

"You owe me no thanks," replied Blanche, calmly, "for self-sacrifice is the order of the sisterhood to which I belong. If you know the meaning of atonement," she added, smiling sadly, "you will understand what my life is; but if I have done anything for your husband beyond my duty, you can reward me with kind thoughts in the future, when I hope," with an earnest look, "that you will be very happy; and now that you are here I will return to my convent. You can take my place, to which you have most right, but remember," she added, impressively, "that your calmness and self-control must never give way."

"You think he will recover the powers of his mind?" asked Celia; and then, in an impulse of the tenderest compassion and gratitude, she wound her arms about her companion's neck, and kissed the pale, proud face, which seemed to her the noblest and most beautiful she had ever seen.

"You are so strong, so good, yet you have a true woman's heart!" she said, tenderly. "I wish you would remain with me always. Why must you go back to the convent?"

"Because I am vowed to it," replied Blanche; but then a light almost of gladness beamed in her face, and she added gently, "but do not misunderstand me, for if it was like a prison to me once, it is no longer. I have found perfect peace in the labours of my holy calling, nor would I now return to the world if I could."

And Celia saw that the words were uttered with all truth, so she said no more; and after a little while the two women parted, never to meet again.

Blanche, as Sister Bertha, returned to the convent, never more to have a thought or desire for anything beyond its walls; for after twelve long years she had found peace, and Celia took her place beside the husband whose love she had sacrificed long ago to anger and false pride.

As she looked on his unconscious face there arose within her a sorrow too dull for tears—a shame too deep for words. She felt that such sin as hers could never be expiated. She hardly dared ask Heaven to restore her husband's life and reason; but day by day she saw the doctors grow more hopeful, and at length they assured her that Valentine Eyre's complete recovery was only a matter of time and care.

They agreed that Celia was wise in having determined to appear before her husband as a stranger, and Dr. Maynard promised that even when Valentine Eyre was quite well her secret should be kept until she herself should choose to reveal it; but at the same time Celia was reminded by her old friend that it was her duty to humble herself before her husband, and implore his forgiveness for the wrong she had done him in the past.

"You must break down your pride, my child," said Dr. Maynard, "and be content

We are now giving one long Complete Story and

with whatever terms your husband may choose to make, for I see now clearly that Valentine Eyre was least to blame; and as for himself," he added, "he must ever feel the deepest remorse for the part he had played."

It was on words such as these that Celia meditated day and night through the months that followed; and inch by inch, stone by stone, slowly and imperceptibly as a wall succumbs to time, she felt her time and wilfulness falling away, leaving her heart open to perfect humility and love.

Months had passed away, which were spent by Churchill Penance in ceaseless torture, for Romola's flight from Chevenage had been told to him; and his heart pictured all evil for her. It well-nigh drove him mad to think of the lonely, innocent girl out on the world, of whose wicked ways she knew nothing. Sometimes he pictured her dying or dead, or worse than either, and his heart endured an agony of self-hatred and sorrow too deep for words.

Then he would remember that there were always kind, pitiful souls, and he would pray that his darling might have fallen in with one of these, and more than once he felt angry with Romola for the rash step she had taken; but when months passed, and no news of her reached him, his fears grew to such a height that he dared not mention her name.

He longed to go to England and search for her; but he had promised Martin that until Valentine was better he would not leave him, and whatever it cost he would keep his promise.

Summer came round again, and the lands round the house in which Valentine Eyre lay creeping back to life were rich with golden corn and swelling vines.

The sun shone and the birds sang everywhere, and Celia's hope strengthened day by day, for in the midst of so much life and loveliness she could scarcely think that death and sorrow were hovering near; and though he looked on her as an utter stranger, she felt that Valentine was best pleased when she was near him.

He often smiled now as she lingered by his side; the touch of her hand seemed to soothe him, and she felt once or twice that, as she moved about the room his eyes followed her until she could almost feel their wistful glance.

One day Dr. Maynard came to her and said,—

"Your husband is improving more rapidly than I had ever dared to hope, but his mind wants some stimulant, if you can understand what I mean; he wants to be provided with some thought which, without making any old note of pain, will interest and rouse his brain to the desire for action."

"What am I to do?" asked Celia, earnestly.

"You must talk to him," replied the good old doctor, taking her hand. "He is well enough now for some bodily exertion, and to-morrow I shall send him to drive alone with you. Then you must make him understand that you are Mrs. Alingham. You must tell him about his children and his home in England, describing all so as to inspire him with the desire to see for himself the things that you speak of; but you must be careful," added Dr. Maynard, gravely, "not to bring the past too suddenly or forcibly before him. He must be led back to it only by slow and gentle degrees."

So with all this on her mind, Celia spent an anxious day; but on the morrow all happened as the doctor had arranged.

Celia played her part well, and found it easier than she imagined; but as she spoke of the brave, handsome boy and the lovely

girl away in England, he was entirely carried away by her subject, and tears often ran down her face, while her sweet, rich voice thrilled with emotion, until suddenly remembering her instructions she stopped, started and afraid to behold the result of her experiment. But it was far happier than she had dared to hope for, for for Valentine Eyre's face had lost the dull, listless look which is usually wore, and it seemed as if he was thinking with interest over all that he had heard.

When they returned from their drive Dr. Maynard could scarcely conceal his elation. He drew Celia aside, and actually pinched her cheek, as he said quite gleefully,—

"Upon my word, I don't know which looks best, my patient or you. But I can only say that you are a capital nurse, and deserve all the credit of the experiment; but to-morrow you shall repeat it, and mind, my dear, that you look as beautiful as you did to-day."

And then the kindly old doctor slipped off, for Celia was trembling like a leaf, and she could no longer restrain her tears.

After this the "experiment" was repeated every day with equally happy results; and, though he uttered few words, Celia felt almost sure that her husband's memory was gradually regaining its power, and often as he listened to her voice he would look at her with a tenderness which sank in her heart.

One day, however, a golden day as it proved to be, some sort of a shadow seemed suddenly to have fallen upon him, and he looked at Celia in a strange, sad way, which filled her with terror lest some change for the worse should have taken place; but just when her fears grew strongest, there came to her a joy so great that she could scarcely realise it.

"You speak to me of my children often," said Valentine, suddenly; "but do you know," he added, slowly, "there is someone else whom I should like to hear about?"

"Who is that?" asked Celia, but her voice shook, and she shrank almost in terror from the fixed, earnest gaze of her companion's eyes.

"It is my wife," replied Valentine; "she was the mother of my children. Why do you not speak of her?" he added, a little fretfully.

"I thought you did not love her!" exclaimed Celia, impulsively, then trembled with fear for the effect of her words.

Valentine Eyre passed his hand over his brow for a moment, as if some struggle were going on in his mind; but when he looked up once more there was a new light in his eyes, and it seemed as if memory had achieved its final triumph.

"Poor Celia!" he said, sadly, "I have been trying to recall her for days. I think it was you helped to remind me of her. It seems strange, but there is something in your hand which kept all the time recalling her to me, though I could not think who it was. No woman ever had such a gentle touch as hers."

"Then you do not hate her memory?" asked Celia, with a sob, and she turned away to hide the tears which ran down her face.

Valentine Eyre was absorbed in thoughts of the past.

"Poor Celia!" he said, at last, "hate her memory? Good Heaven! No. If it is full of bitterness to me, it is because I was so blind as to have thrown away blindly the gift that too late I would have given worlds to possess. If you have heard the story of my marriage, Mrs. Alingham," he went on, sadly, "you will not blame me, perhaps, for the mistake that I made. The circumstances

of our union blinded me to the fact that I loved my wife, and the way I sought to force my heart did the rest, and so I ruined my Celia's life, and sent her to an early grave!"

"You judge yourself too harshly," replied a faint, broken voice. "You must remember that your wife was to blame. It was her duty to be loving and patient, and to wait for your love."

"I will hear no blame of her," said Valentine, almost passionately. "Poor, gentle Celia! Her error only proved how deep and true was her love for me. I thought of her unceasingly," he continued, "during the long years of my solitary confinement, until at last the powers of my mind gave way; but if it could win Celia back even to say one word of forgiveness I think I would gladly endure all that suffering over again. But she is dead, and I would to Heaven I could forget how she died."

For a few moments there was silence, during which Valentine Eyre sat staring straight before him over the glorious blue mountains which bounded the landscape, as if he fancied Celia's soul had its place of rest somewhere there.

Then a deep, quivering sigh broke from him, and the woman beside him turned and saw such unutterable sadness and longing in his face that she determined to risk all for his sake.

"Suppose your wife had deceived you?" she said, slowly. "Suppose she were alive, and come and tell you that she had left you to think of her as dead, and yourself free to wed another? Would you call it a crime too great for pardon, or would you grant her the love and the forgiveness that you feel towards her now?"

"Love! forgiveness!" echoed Valentine, in a bewildered tone. "What do you mean? If this wild thing that you speak of could come to pass," he added, sorrowfully, "if Celia had done this that you suggest; if, after all, she were not dead, and could come back to me, it would be for me to ask forgiveness for having loved her too late."

"You are quite sure of this?" asked a choking voice.

"I am quite sure of it; but, oh! why do you speak of a thing so vain and hopeless? Celia is dead, and my life has been—but, oh, why!" as the carriage suddenly stopped, and the reins fell from his companion's hand, "Mrs. Alingham," cried Valentine Eyre, in bewilderment, "what is this?"

"It is this," repeated Celia, as her voice suddenly changed, and her head fell on his breast. "It is this," she cried again, in thrilling tones, "that I am Celia, your wife, who, however wrong and wicked she has been, has loved you well and faithfully always, and who must die now if you do not forgive her!"

The birds sang on, the summer breeze waved the golden grain, and the very hills seemed to dance for joy in the beauty of the world; and at last Valentine Eyre began slowly to emerge from the trance of wonder into which Celia's words had thrown him, and to feel his heart and pulses stir once more to feelings beyond all name or power of expression.

It was neither joy nor pain which thrilled him, but there was something of the awe which should steal upon us at the working of a great miracle, and something of the fear that comes with all great happiness—the dread that what has been sent us is too sweet to be a reality.

"Celia!" said Valentine at last; but when no answer came, his heart grew cold, for the thought that this was but one of the dreams in which he had been living lately.

But when he tried to raise the head which lay upon his breast he discovered the cause of her silence. Celia's happiness had been too great, and she had fainted.

"Well," said Dr. Maynard that evening, "I should have thought that if anyone had swooned it would have been Valentine Eyre; and as for you, Madam Celia, to whose care I entrusted my patient, I am surprised that you should wilfully destroy my confidence in this shameful way. But there, added the doctor, with a roguish look, "for caution commend me to a woman. However, all's well that ends well. And now I suppose, while everyone is in good humor, I had better insure forgiveness for myself?"

"And I meant to profit by our patient's sudden recovery by taking leave of absence," said Churchill, with an eager look at Celia, who replied, hastily,—

"You have been more than good, and to-morrow, if you will, I shall gladly speed you forth. For I cannot be happy," she added, "until my darling Romola is safe and happy once more. You do not think," she added, anxiously, "that it was wrong of me to leave her to her fate when my husband needed me?"

"I think you did all that was right," replied Churchill, hastily, and then his face suddenly lighted up, and he sprang towards the door, exclaiming excitedly,—

"At last! Here comes Martin, with the English mail! Heaven grant there may be some news! Ah!" in a disappointed tone, as he ransacked the bag with trembling hand, "there is not a line from my mother or either of the detectives, which shows that nothing has been heard of Romola. Only one letter. Who can it be from? Ah!" as he glanced at the envelope, "I ought to know that writing well. It is Ethel Drood's."

"And she can have nothing good to say," remarked Celia, a little bitterly, for she did not know of the change which had taken place in the girl whom she had always known as heartless and unprincipled.

"Except something unpleasant," Churchill reluctantly opened the letter, but he had scarcely glanced down the page before the frown on his brow changed as if by magic to a look of indescribable joy, and the next moment there broke from his lips such a cry that it rang all over the house; but before its echoes had died away every heart was thrilling with unutterable happiness.

"Oh, thank Heaven!" cried Churchill, "she is found! My darling is found! She is safe with Ethel Drood!"

Then he could tell no more. His voice broke down in a great sob of joy and pain; and covering his face with his hands he rushed from the room to be alone with his overwhelming bliss, leaving Celia between tears and laughter, with no one to pour out her heart to but the faithful Martin, who had found sufficient reward for all his toil and trouble in the thought that his beloved master was at last going to be made as happy as any human being can be.

Later on, when they were all calmer, Celia read the letter which had made them so happy. In it the writer said very little about herself, but there was enough to show that Ethel Drood was now really striving to be unselfish and good.

In all that concerned herself Ethel's letter was as patient as possible. She told them that, by one of those strange coincidences which are much more frequent than people think, she had happened to meet with Romola at a railway station on the London line on the very day of her flight from Chevenage Court.

"The poor child looked very ill and frightened," wrote Ethel, "and, somehow,

I at once suspected that something was wrong. After all that had happened I felt answerable for her safety; and so, instead of letting her slip away from me, as she seemed to wish to do, I persuaded her to come into the waiting-room, where I kept her talking until the train she would have gone by had started, and then I had a great deal of difficulty in inducing her to accompany me to my own home. It was not until I had begged it as a kindness, telling her how lonely I was with my grandmother, that I prevailed on the poor child. But I got her home at last, and just in time to prevent her sinking altogether from exhaustion."

Then Ethel went on to say that Romola had been dangerously ill, but was now recovering, and it was only within the last few days that she, Ethel, had discovered the meaning of the silence. She, Ethel, had at once written there, hoping to relieve Mrs. Alingham's anxiety with an assurance of Romola's safety, but to her surprise neither word nor sign had come in reply; and as the sick girl's case grew more hopeless she had sent telegrams almost daily with the same result. But a few mornings ago all had been explained by a gentleman from Scotland Yard, who called and explained that he had been employed by Mr. Penance to search everywhere for Romola.

The letter wound up with a respectful mention of the late Marquis of Eastshire's cruel and terrible death; and then there were a few lines pleading earnestly that Churchill would in time try both to forgive and forget the past, for which Ethel said she could never forgive herself. And when he thought of Romola and all that Ethel had done for her, he found it impossible to cherish any more resentment.

"I should not be worthy the name of man did I refuse to forgive her," he said to himself, "for if she did great wrong she has also made a great atonement."

After which Churchill went upstairs to make preparations for a hasty departure, for at the earliest hour of the following morning he intended to leave England.

"Mrs. Alingham has returned, sir. She arrived just now in a hired carriage, and a stranger with her. She desired me, sir, to inform you of her arrival."

"Confound Mrs. Alingham, and you too!" exclaimed Hermann in a fury. "Who ordered you to admit Mrs. Alingham or any other person at this late hour?"

The butler looked quite unmoved at this onslaught, but he replied, in the most deferential tones,—

"Mrs. Alingham did not ask to be admitted, sir. When I opened the door she and the gentleman walked in as if it was their right. I told Mrs. Alingham that you were at dinner, sir, and she said she would have hers in the library."

"She has come to fight," muttered Hermann, as the butler withdrew. "Well, I'm ready for her, and we'll see who'll win!" But in spite of this confident assertion Hermann was in no hurry to meet his antagonist; and as he lingered over the remainder of his solitary dinner he wondered uneasily who was the man that Celia had brought with her. He hoped vaguely that it might not turn out to be a lawyer, and wished with some impatience that Zitella would spend a little less time in her room. She was lately almost always in bed, and, when up, her moods were either so muddled or furious that even Hermann was beginning to shun her society. But now he would have been glad of her to back him up as he entered the library, and found Celia sitting in such darkness that he could not see her face; but it was less out of consideration

for her than for himself that Hermann rang the bell violently, so that lights might be brought.

As the peal died away with Hermann's angry mutterings, Celia half rose from her chair, and out of the darkness her voice came cold and clear.

"When I left you, as you remember, it was with the promise that when I came again you should beg for mercy to me. Now I have come to show it unasked, if you will only express some desire to deal rightly by my children."

For all answer Hermann broke into a loud, mocking laugh. So this was the fight of which Celia had spoken so loudly.

"Well," he thought, almost with disgust, "she is a poor, weak, grovelling creature after all," and then he said aloud,—

"So you have given in. I thought so! And now, madam, may I ask where the mercy comes in, or what form does your magnanimity intend to take towards me, your dear and adored husband?"

But ignoring these sneers Celia replied, calmly,—

"I came here with no other hope than this—that I might be able to show you mercy for the sake of the name you have borne here, though I have brought with me one who can bring your crimes home to you."

"May I ask who is this valiant person?" asked Hermann, in the same sneering tones.

"You shall learn his name from his own lips," replied Celia, and at that moment the lights were brought.

After the darkness Hermann's eyes were smitten by the glare of two hall lamps, so that he could not see clearly at first; but gradually he became aware of the presence of a tall, thin man, who, enveloped in a heavy travelling coat, was standing in the recess of a far-off window.

His back was towards the other occupants of the room, but even that sent a slow thrill of dread creeping into Hermann's breast. Then the strange guest suddenly turned round, and in the full light of the unshaded lamps disclosed the white and emaciated features of Valentine Eyre!

As Celia looked from one to the other of the two men she ceased to marvel at the boldness of the trick which had been played, for the resemblance was so strong that even a mother's eyes would have been puzzled to distinguish between the two brothers.

It was all the stronger when even evil passion died out of Hermann's white face in the strength of the terror which seemed to have paralysed him in one single stroke.

He stood for a moment a man turned to stone, and then without a sound or movement of the lips fell forward to the ground.

They rang for servants, who bore the unconscious man to a room upstairs, where he was put to bed with as little delay as possible.

Doctors were sent for, and it was soon ascertained, to all intents and purposes, that Hermann Eyre's earthly career was at an end.

He might have lived for years, but it would be a life without speech or motion, for the paralytic stroke had spared neither brain nor limb.

The shock he had just sustained might have hastened the catastrophe, but the medical men were of opinion that it was but the natural and inevitable result of intemperance.

Valentine Eyre paid every respect to his brother. Hermann was provided with a suite of rooms at Chevenage, and servants, who had no other business than to wait on the helpless man. And no attention was

omitted, nothing forgotten, which could in any way alleviate the sufferings which he frequently endured, or lighten the dull and heavy hours of an existence which had all the horrors and helplessness of death without its peace.

But for Zitella, Valentine had neither forgiveness nor mercy. He would not see her, nor allow Celia to do so; but in a few stern lines he told her that she must quit his roof at once, and in any other country than England he would provide her with a home, and such a sum of money as would enable her to live quietly and decently for the rest of her life.

This was the only concession Valentine Eyre would make, and those who know how pitilessly her hand had shaped most of the evil of his life were ready to say that Zitella had been treated better than she deserved.

But Valentine was determined that if ever this wicked woman should return to England his promised support should be immediately withdrawn, and it was on this understanding that the lost, degraded wife of Hermann Eyre passed for ever from the lives of all connected with this story.

Her money was regularly claimed for years, and regularly paid through the family solicitor; but suddenly the applications ceased, and it was naturally supposed that Zitella was dead. But to the inquiries made concerning her no response came from the Italian town in which she had taken up her abode, and where and how Zitella ended her life was never known.

* * * * *

But we have anticipated somewhat, and must now return to the real hero and heroine of our story.

It is a most glorious June afternoon. A day for a queen, Ethel Drood says, as she sets wide the long French windows, that the sweet summer breezes may bear the scent of the roses to the low couch on which Romola is lying in the pretty morning-room at Deep Dene, which is the name of the sweet, quaint home that Ethel Drood shares with her grandmother, old Lady Hilton.

Having set the window open Ethel returns to her invalid friend, and bends over her with an expression altogether new and beautiful to see. Indeed, those about Ethel—the servants in the house and the old grandmother—are never weary of looking at the girl's face. They declare that some miracle which they cannot comprehend has worked the wonderful change.

"A day for a queen!" repeats Ethel, as she lays her hand caressingly on Romola's pale brow. "The coronation day of summer!" she goes on; "and oh, my dear! yours must come soon! Your lover must be here before long, and then I shall see your heart crowned with the happiness which is rightly yours!"

"Dear Ethel, I am happy now," rejoined Romola. "I am content to wait, and, indeed," she added, "I could not rejoice just when—"

"You are thinking of your friend," interrupted Ethel; "but you know he wished you to be happy?"

"I know," replied Romola, and tears filled her eyes, "and I will be happy while I cherish his memory to the last as noblest and truest; but I wonder why he left me all that wealth? I wish, indeed, that, instead, he had bequeathed it to Church—"

But suddenly the name died on her lips. Then her voice broke in a faint, trembling cry, for a shadow had crossed the window, a foot-step sounded on her ear; and Ethel, who had heard nothing, turned at Romola's cry to behold Churchill Penance with the fear and the hope and all the yearning

of love and sorrow in his handsome blue eyes.

What wonder, then, that without a word Ethel took the young man's hand and led him forward to Romola's side, and, leaving the two together, she slipped away?

* * * * *

"My darling, if you will not promise to be mine soon I shall think it is because you cannot forgive me what I have done."

"My dear!" Tenderly the girl placed her hand in her lover's, tenderly she raised her dark, loving eyes to his. "My dear," she repeated, "you are right. I cannot forgive you any more, for if there was any forgiveness due to you it has been granted long ago; but, indeed, I never blamed you, never thought that you had been either cruel or unkind."

Then no more was said for a long time. Churchill held the fragile form close to his now rapturously beating heart, and gazed down into the girl's face, thinking how exquisitely pure and lovely she was!

"Think of it, my darling!" he said, pleadingly. "I know I am not worthy of you, but think of how I love you, and the empty years that have gone! I am not young, Romola, and in the experience that maketh men sad I am older even than my years. Do not keep me waiting too long."

She could not resist the wistfulness of his tone, the tender pleading of his eyes, as once more she raised her head to look at him, and thought of the words he had just spoken. He not worthy of her! Well, perhaps he was not; but what man is really worthy of a truly good woman, and what woman ever questions a man's worth that loves as Romola loved Churchill Penance, in whose hand she now placed her own?

"I want to make you happy," she said, gently; "but because of the friend we have just lost I would like to wait a little while longer."

"He would like you to be happy, darling!" said Churchill, quoting Ethel's words with all a lover's selfishness.

"I know that," rejoined Romola once more, "and I am happy. But it would please him if he could know that I gave one whole year to his memory. You will wait, Churchill, until September?"

"It is a long time, but I suppose it must be so," replied the lover, with a sigh.

"And now, dear," said the girl, gently, "you must think of your mother, Churchill. Not even for me must you forget her. You may come back with her as soon as you like," she added, "but to-morrow you must go to your mother."

And when the morrow came little Mrs. Penance clasped her son to her heart, never, as he fondly told her, to lose sight of him again; for the future Marchioness of Eastshire had made it a proviso that her mother-in-law was to be "one of the family"—an arrangement from which the Marquis was not likely to dissent.

Two or three years have passed away since then, and once more it is September. Round a beautiful stately home the glowing tints of autumn are deepening in the wood, the leaves on the trees are turning to the hues that poets love, and the swallows are getting them ready to fly.

But at Summerwood Hall nobody is sad for the death of the best season of the year, for in the old house which Churchill and Romola have chosen from all others to be their home there dwells the spirit of eternal sunshine, whose name is love.

One lovely September, as the daylight fades into a tender gloaming, there are three people on the stately terrace at Summerwood Hall. One is a dainty little lady,

with sweet blue eyes, and hair still as soft and bright as any young girl's, and the other is a tall, noble-looking man, a big likeness of the little woman, with a tiny wife of a girl in his arms, and it is curious to note how like this trio are to one another. But suddenly the man's somewhat serious face lights up as if a sunbeam had fallen across it; and leaving the little lady, who looks after him with a fond smile, he advances to meet a young girl, beautiful-browed, dark-eyed, who has come from the house.

"Romola, my darling," he whispers, tenderly, and the sweet girl-wife smiles as she takes the tiny Celia in her arms, and, in exchange for this treasure, gives her husband a kiss and some open letters.

"Such happy news, dear!" she says, and her tones are sweet and musical as a silver bell. "Father and mother will be here to-morrow. We may expect them at one o'clock. But what do you think, Churchill? Now guess! No, you can't? I had better tell you at once. Ethel Drood has at last accepted her old lover, Sir Digby Harte. Dear Ethel! I am so glad. She deserves to be happy!"

[THE END.]

TO-DAY.

Whate'er the future holds of sad or sweet,
Be glad to-day.
Drink of life's passing joy, for swift and fleet,
Glides time away.

Live in the present, hoping this alone—
That love will last;
Letting the sweetness of this day atone
For all the past.

Seek not to lift the veil from future hours.
Blessing and pain
Will come to us. Alike the thorns, the flowers,
If love remain.

K. B. N.

Our next issue will be a particularly strong and striking No. In addition to the first five chapters of **A Golden Destiny**, details of which appear in another column, we shall publish a long complete story of 25,000 words, entitled,

Edith's Dilemma,

By the Author of
"LOVE'S ENTANGLEMENT," &c.

The story opens with the news that Lord Vernon has met his death in Africa big game shooting, while his brother, the heir to the title and estates, lies at the point of death. Lady Vernon, for the sake of her unborn child, agrees to marry her late husband's brother, on what is thought to be his death-bed. Unfortunately for Lady Vernon he recovers.

This story complete next week.

Gleanings

It is estimated by the makers of artificial limbs that there are 30,000 Englishmen who have lost one or both legs.

UMBRELLAS are rarely seen in Poyta, Peru. It is the driest spot on the earth. The average interval between two showers of rain is seven years.

To encourage matrimony in France a bill has been introduced in the French Senate providing for a tax on all unmarried people who have attained the age of thirty years.

It is said that bees are excellent weather prophets. When a shower is near they never go far from home, but gather their food within a short distance of their hives or nests.

It is said that artesian wells have a daily succession of ebb and flow, like the ocean tides, only the process is reversed. The times of greatest flow of an artesian well is the period of low time in the ocean.

THE Czar of Russia is more afraid of poison and bullets than of indigestion; yet, to assist in keeping himself in good physical condition, he has twenty-seven physicians, chosen from the medical celebrities of the country.

A CORONER's jury in Rosslyn, Ireland, was summoned to investigate the case of a man who was found dead in the street. The verdict announced that the cause of death was unknown; and the mystery was deepened by this extraordinary declaration: "We believe that life was not extinct when the corpse was found."

SIR THOMAS LIPTON, K.C.V.O., in the columns of a Philadelphia paper, has given advice to the youth of America in which the youth of England will find a few crumbs for themselves. "I think the American boy is ahead of the English boy. I find that in America the managers of large concerns are often very youthful. In England a man must look old before he is thought to look wise." Then follows a statement which, coming from so high an authority as Sir Thomas Lipton, will challenge the attention of those who are responsible for the education of the "ingenious youth" of our nation. "I hold," says Sir Thomas, "that it would be a good thing to send every English boy to America when he is seventeen, and to keep him there for a couple of years." Sir Thomas himself, one recalls, went to the States at that age, and his experiences there constitute, in his opinion, the best training he ever had.

THE people who have the best eyesight, as a rule, are those who are mostly employed in the open air. Generally speaking, savage tribes possess the keenest eyesight, acquired through hunting. Natives of the Solomon Islands, in the Pacific, are very quick at perceiving distant objects, such as ships at sea, and will pick out birds concealed in dense foliage some sixty or seventy feet high. Shepherds and sailors are usually blessed with good sight. Esquimaux will detect a white fox in the snow at a great distance away, while the Arabs of the deserts of Arabia have such extreme powers of vision that on the vast plains of the desert they will pick out objects invisible to the ordinary eye, at ranges from one to two miles distant. Among civilized peoples the Norwegians have better eyesight than most if not all others, as they more generally fulfill the necessary conditions. The reason why defective eyes are so much on the increase in this country and in Europe lies in too much study of books in early life, and in badly lighted rooms.

THE Wartburg in Thuringia is, after the "castled crag" of Hohenzollern in Swabia, perhaps the most interesting historical building in all the Fatherland. For it was here that Luther, when translating the Bible into German, threw his ink-pot at the Devil—the stains being still visible on the wall, as the blood of David Rizzio may still be seen on the floor of Queen Mary's anteroom at Holyrood. But the Wartburg is also famous as the scene of one of Wagner's greatest operas. On its rocky height it overlooks one of the finest sylvan scenes in all Germany—the Thuringer Wald, than which it is impossible to imagine a more delightful resort of tourists. In recent years it has been restored and converted into a kind of historical museum, like the castle of Hohenzollern, the cradle of the Prussian dynasty.

THERE have been some notable Royal gatherings on the Donald Currie boats when they have visited Denmark, the last, of course, being on the occasion of the unfortunate Tantalion Castle's call at Copenhagen, on its way to the opening of the Kiel Canal. Then the luncheon party to meet Mr. Gladstone included the King and Queen of Denmark, the Crown Prince and Princess, Princess Louise of Denmark, Princess Marie of Denmark, Prince and Princess Waldemar, and Prince John. A dozen years before the gathering on the Pembroke Castle in the same harbour was even more remarkable, for there were Queen Alexandria, the King and Queen of Denmark, the Emperor and Empress of Russia, the King and Queen of Greece, and twenty-nine of the Imperial and Royal children, to say nothing of Gladstone and Tennyson.

AT Old Fold Farm, High Barnet, has been offered for sale, the Enfield Chase Stag-hounds, the owner having decided to give them up. Hounds, hinds, hunters, deer-cart—everything in fact in connection with the meet, will be included. It is not surprising that this survival of Royal Enfield Chase should be abandoned, seeing that the district is rapidly becoming suburbanised and unfit for sport. The first mention of the Chase is in a record in the reign of Edward II. Queen Elizabeth hunted the hart there, and James I. so liked the district that he made it a Royal Chase, and so it continued down to the time of the Commonwealth, when it was seized and divided. It was "dischased" by Act of Parliament in 1779, and the only portion at present not enclosed is Hadley Common.

AMONG the visitors to the Glasgow Exhibition there will be no more interested groups than those of the employés of W. P. Hartley, the well-known jam manufacturer, of Aintree, Liverpool. Every person over 18 years of age, and having been continuously in his employ for one year, is entitled to take part in this holiday to Glasgow, which is arranged in two parties, the first starting on May 20th and returning on May 24th, and the second on May 27th, returning on the following Friday, May 31st. The entire cost, including railway fare, hotel expenses, free admission to the Exhibition on four days, and a steamer excursion through the Kyles of Bute is paid by Mr. Hartley. Such liberality on the part of an employer is rarely met with. In this connection it is of interest to mention that Mr. Hartley is about to open a factory in London for the manufacture of his jams, marmalade, and bottled fruits. The excellence of these goods is well known in the North and West of England, and residents in the South will soon have the opportunity of becoming better acquainted with jams prepared in a way that keeps the fruit whole and preserves its natural delicate flavour.

BANK holidays in England were not appreciated by Professor Huxley, because many of the people who celebrated them became annoyingly jolly. After enduring one of these days in London, Mr. Huxley said: "If ever I travel within measurable distance of bank holiday again, may jackasses set on my grandmother's grave."

THE scientific achievement of photographing the human stomach of a living subject has been actually accomplished by two French physicians, Drs. Lang and Melzing. The process is thus briefly described: A stomach tube, sixty-six centimeters long, with a diameter of eleven millimeters, was introduced, having at the lower end an electric lamp and at the upper end a camera. The stomach was first emptied and washed, and then distended with air. Then fifty pictures were taken in rapid succession in from ten to fifteen minutes. By turning the apparatus on its axis all parts of the mucous membrane can be pictured. The photographs are about the size of a cherry stone, but they can be enlarged to any extent.

AN ALDERMANIC INTERVIEW.—Interviewer: "Alderman Swelhed, I have come to get your views on the proposed change in the curriculum of the grammar school." Alderman Swelhed: "Curriculum! What the devil's that? I'm agin it, whatever it is." Alderman Swelhed (reading the report of the interviewer next morning): "Our distinguished townsman, Mr. M. T. Swelhed, was found at his charming home, surrounded by abundant indication of ripe scholarship and sturdy common sense. In reply to our reporter's question, he said: 'I do not desire to force my opinions upon the public; but this I will say, that I have given to this question long and studious attention, incidentally examining into the curricula of institutions of learning both here and abroad, and, although I find in the existing course of study not a few matters for condemnation, still, upon the whole, I cannot say that I should advise any radical change until I have further time to examine into the subject.' By George, that feller's got my exact language, word for word! And he didn't take no notes, neither! By George, what a memory that feller must have."

THE birthplace of Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, is uncertain. Some authorities assert that he was born at Bonavens Taberniae, which is thought to be the modern Boulogne; others assert that he was born at Nemthur (now Dumbarton), Scotland, about the year 390. His original name was Succath, and that of Patricius was conferred upon him by Pope Celestine. At the age of sixteen a band of marauders carried him a captive to Ireland. He escaped, but was recaptured, and once more conveyed to the Emerald Isle. Again he tried to elude his captors, and determined to devote himself to an ecclesiastical life. He was ordained in Scotland, and some years later was consecrated a bishop. In 433 he voluntarily returned to Ireland, and there preached the gospel with such convincing logic and extraordinary success that he converted most of the inhabitants to Christianity. His remarkable personality was entirely unselfish; he was kind, charitable, energetic, and devoted to the interests of his fellow man, without thought of reward other than the realization of the hope that his labours would be crowned with a harvest of blessings for the people whom he had converted from paganism to a religion founded on faith, hope, and charity. He died in Down, Ulster, on March 17, 493 or 495. His birthday being unknown, the celebration of Saint Patrick's Day commemorates the time of his death.

Facetiæ.

LADY (to new servant): "I do not tolerate gossip, but—if you know any interesting news you may tell me."

HE: "I see they are making clothes now out of wood fibre." She: "Oh, what's the use? Somebody will be sure to invent a new kind of moth."

MINISTER: "Yes, children, we all have besetting sins. So have I, like the rest. Now, what do you suppose is my besetting sin?" Bright Boy: "Talking."

ARTFUL JIMMIE (conscious of unprepared lessons and desirous of staying from school): "Mamma, what sort of illness is there you don't have to take medicine for?"

"In dealing with the criminal classes," remarked the eminent psychologist, "we must rely upon psychic force." "I'd rather rely upon the police force," murmured the Cheerful Idiot.

MRS. PETTIT: "Whenever I express a desire for anything my husband never objects." Mrs. Ig. Nord: "Same with me; I can express the desire as often as I please; it never disturbs him."

BRUCE: "Mamma told me I could stay in the parlour last night while Mr. Huggard was calling on sister Bess." Elsie: "Did she?" Ethel: "Yes, and it was great fun. We played 'blind-man's bluff,' and they let me be the blind man nearly all the time."

"THERE'S no use talking, old man, when a chap has too much money life is a beastly bore." "But you manage to kill the time, don't you?" "No. I went all the way around the world in my yacht just for that purpose, and be hanged if I hadn't gained a whole day."

PRIDE IN HIS WORK.—Millionaire (showing his library to distinguished novelist): "See them books?" Distinguished Novelist: "Yes." M.: "All bound in calf, ain't they?" D. N.: "So they are!" M. (proudly): "Well, sir; I killed all them calves myself."

ATTACHMENTS MADE AND LAID.—Polonious: "Attachments are quickly formed in our profession." Hamakter: "Alas, 'tis true!" Polonious: "Why that note of melancholy in thy tone?" Hamakter: "I was thinking of my wardrobe which my landlord has this day attached."

A DISAPPOINTED GIRL.—Tess: "He's awful handsome, don't you think?" Jess: "Handsome is that handsome does. He had the impertinence last night to tell me that he was going to kiss me the first chance he got, and—" Tess: "Weren't you indignant, though?" Jess: "I should say so. He didn't keep his promise."

WILLING TO KILL BOTH.—First Lady Passenger: "If that window isn't opened this minute I know I shall die." Second Ditto: "Who opened that window? If it is not shut, I shall die, I'm sure." Philosophical Gentleman: "Conductor, please keep that window open till one of these ladies dies, then shut it and give the other an opportunity to quit this vale of tears."

THE MASCULINE MEMORY.—Binks: "What's wrong?" Jinks: "My wife gave me a letter to post this morning." Binks: "And you forgot it, eh? Well, it isn't too late." Jinks: "No, but I posted it. I kept it in my hand, and fixed my mind right on it until I got to a box, and then dropped it in. I was bound she shouldn't have anything to complain of this time." Binks: "Then what's the matter?" Jinks: "It has just occurred to me that I forgot to put a stamp on it."

Helpful Talks

BY THE EDITOR.

The Editor is pleased to hear from his readers at any time.

All letters must give the name and address of the writers, not for publication, but as a guarantee of good faith.

J. HALE.—I would gladly assist you if possible, but to ask me for information about "Ann King who died in London," is like asking me to look for a needle in the proverbial bundle of hay.

SWEET WILLIAM.—Arthur Orton kept up the fiction of being the Tichborne claimant to the last, and I believe the inscription on his coffin was to that effect.

SLANG.—A "tanner" is slang for sixpence, and a "bob" means a shilling. The latter is used both in the singular and the plural; thus, the words, "five bob," mean five shillings.

G. HAZLE.—The murder of Burke and Cavendish, in Phoenix Park, Dublin, occurred on May 6th, 1882. Brady, Curly, Fagan, Caffrey and Keeley were hanged. Kavanagh, Carey and O'Keefe betrayed their companions by giving evidence for the State.

BEAUTY'S BRIDE.—The photograph is that of a bright, sensible, intelligent and amiable lady. You have no reason to despair of finding a suitable partner. You say you are thirty, yet your photograph does not make you appear over twenty-five. Be patient; there is no reason for urgency in your case. The right man will present himself in due time.

L. SMYTH.—A simple method of inducing sleep in cases of persistent insomnia, and one that has succeeded where drugs have failed, is simply to administer a moderate amount of warm liquid food, such as beef tea or boiled milk, before the patient goes to bed. This diverts the blood from the brain to the abdominal organs, and thereby away the cerebral excitement that precludes sleep.

ROMOLA.—It is your desire to look young and retain a clear and healthy complexion. Then live as sensible a life as you can, avoiding late hours, retiring and rising early, taking plenty of outdoor exercise, and eating plain and substantial food, shunning pastry, pickles and heating sauces and condiments. Many young women allow themselves to slowly decay through indolence; they do not take sufficient exercise to keep the body in a healthy condition.

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SPOT COUPON.

June 8th, 1901

PHIL.—1. I have no knowledge of any process which will equalize the varying tints of your hair. 2. To get rid of fleshworms, wash the face frequently with warm water, good castile soap, and dry with a coarse Turkish towel. To prevent them you must observe hygienic rules. Carefulness in regard to diet is essential. The fewer sweets and the less pastry eaten the better for the skin. Those who consume rich foods are more likely to be troubled with fleshworms than those who eat wholesome, plain food. Rich soups, highly-seasoned dishes and cheese should be avoided, and in their places plenty of fresh vegetables and fruit should be partaken of, and anything likely to cause indigestion shunned, for this is often the cause of fleshworms.

T. MERRIFIELD.—The popular operetta of "H. M. S. Pinafore," by Sir Arthur Sullivan and W. S. Gilbert, received its initial performance at the Strand Theatre, London, on May 25th, 1878. Gilbert furnished the libretto, and Sullivan composed the music. They also produced in collaboration several other highly admired operettas, among them being "The Pirates of Penzance," "Patience," "Iolanthe," "Princess Ida," "The Mikado" and "The Gondoliers." It was while the last named operetta was in course of representation that a disagreement occurred between them and they separated. They became reconciled after a few years, and together they produced "Utopia," which failed to score a popular success. Sir Arthur Seymour Sullivan was born in London, May 13th, 1842, and was the son of Professor Thomas Sullivan, an Irish Bandmaster. The great composer was knighted in 1883. His death occurred on Nov. 22nd, 1900. His most popular simple melodies were the ballads of "The Lost Chord" and "Let me Dream Again."

KATE WARDEN.—There is no reason for regret because your hair is of a reddish tint. Within the past few years hair of a dark red shade has been popularly considered admirable, and it is well known that for generations artists have extolled what they term Titian red locks. Ladies whose "crown of glory" is of this tint should not lament; they must remember that the Catherine who did so much to make Russia a great nation had auburn locks; so had Maria Theresa of Austria; so had Anne of Austria, who ruled France so long; so had Queen Elizabeth and Catherine Borgia; as well as Mary Antoinette, whose tresses had in them a glint of gold; and Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, possessed most becoming hair of an auburn tint.

BROWN LADY.—Here is a recipe for baked bananas: From one side of each banana strip the skin, and loosen the remainder all round the fruit. Arrange on a baking dish, sprinkle each with a teaspoonful of sugar and a few drops of lemon juice, and bake in a quick oven until tender. When properly prepared, the skin surrounding the banana will be filled with a rich syrup, which will jelly as it cools. Another way is to make a syrup of three-quarters of a cup of water, one-quarter of a cup of lemon juice and one-half cup of sugar, for a dozen bananas. Strip off the skins, cut into quarters, place in a deep baking dish, pour over the hot syrup, and bake until tender, basting several times with the syrup.

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